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BUDGET STATEMENT 2008/2009

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to present to this Honourable House and to the nation, the first Budget of this new People's National Movement administration. On a personal note, this is also a special occasion for me since it is my first Budget Statement as Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, when the People's National Movement Government returned to office in 2001, we embarked upon a journey, based on a vision – Vision 2020. As Honourable Members are aware, this Government's vision is to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a developed nation on or before the year 2020. We articulated a vision to redefine Trinidad and Tobago's place in an increasingly globalised world. The transformation to developed country status is founded on well sequenced- well calibrated- social and economic reforms in – among other areas- Education, Health, Housing, Social Services, Water Electricity, Telecommunications and Transport. It also involves transforming our major cities, beginning with our capital city into modern metropolitan centres.

This vision is premised on the optimal utilization of resources in the energy sector and on the meaningful diversification of the non-energy sector so as to ensure sustainable economic growth. Accordingly, in the short term, this requires substantial capital investment to build the necessary productive capacity toward the realisation of the objective of achieving developed country status that is Vision 2020.

Mr. Speaker, countries just like individuals, and firms, must spend, save, and invest in order to secure their future.

Our vision commits us to the nurturing of a caring society: by ensuring that the benefits of economic success filter throughout the population, bringing prosperity to all; by providing assistance to those in need and by looking after those who cannot do so for themselves.

Mr. Speaker, our approach to governance and economic management is founded on the principle that the main purpose of government is the welfare of the people and that all economic and social programmes must redound to the individual and collective well-being.

Mr. Speaker, these are the principles on which our Republic is built. These are the principles upon which the People's National Movement was built. And these are the principles which inform the philosophy of this Budget.

While the Government is committed to implementing the policies and programmes to facilitate the development of our nation, each citizen must continue to seek out and take advantage of the opportunities afforded him or her. Our hopes and aspirations for ourselves as individuals and for our nation are the foundation upon which Vision 2020 was developed. Our development agenda is targeted to accommodate economic restructuring, sustained

growth and competitiveness, complementing an environment that fosters social equity, equal opportunity, and positive values.

Ours will be a society where the touchstone for measuring the validity and efficacy of all efforts is the impact on the future of its sons and daughters. A society that celebrates its achievements and adheres to its commitments. A society set to be on par with developed nations, yet distinct in the richness of its diversity. It is in this context that the theme of this year's Budget: "**Shaping Our Future Together**", is placed. Mr. Speaker, by this we mean that all of us, including not just those of us in this Honourable House, but the teacher, the student, the farmer, the business man, the homemaker, all have a part to play in shaping the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, a cardinal principle of this Government is the collaborative approach. Our development model envisages complementary roles for the state, labour and the private sectors. We see the state as both investor and facilitator, providing the appropriate investment climate, and investing in the necessary strategic infrastructural facilities which are necessary pre-requisites to allow private sector activities to flourish. While the State's main role is the provision of public goods and services that are fundamental requirements in the growth process, it also has a responsibility to intervene in selected areas to support strategic investment, or where private investment is non-existent or slow to materialize.

Mr. Speaker our developmental approach puts a premium on the participation of all our citizens. This role is particularly critical now as we deal with crime; it is critical as we formalize new governance arrangements for local government and agriculture and it is equally critical, in this new global inflationary environment, where consumers need to be conscious of their tremendous power to influence market forces.

Mr. Speaker, during 2002-2007, Trinidad and Tobago made significant economic and social progress on the road to transforming our country into a developed nation. The international rating agencies acknowledged our success by upgrading our investment rating and the people of Trinidad and Tobago demonstrated their support for our strategies and for our management of the country's economic and social affairs by giving us a resounding endorsement at the polls in November 2007.

Mr. Speaker, the Government's commitment is to build on its achievements of the past six years and to accelerate the pace of development in all areas of national life.

As part of our economic strategy we have announced plans for deeper industrialization, involving downstream energy sector spinoffs and for intensified focus on economic diversification. Agriculture was also identified as a priority sector to address the urgent challenge of food price inflation and to contribute to the achievement of food sufficiency.

In the social sectors, our strategy for the next five years recognizes the need to continue to provide affordable housing, especially for low income households; and to pursue further improvements in health care, emphasizing accessibility and affordability.

Mr. Speaker, infrastructural development has been identified as a special priority over the next several years; specifically on an improved water supply; a comprehensive drainage programme; enhanced power generation and distribution facilities and a major expansion of transportation infrastructure. I will have more to say on this later.

Mr. Speaker, human resource development is pivotal to achieving our medium and long term goals. This explains our comprehensive interventions into education, starting from early childhood care, through primary and secondary education, and up to tertiary education. It also explains the significant investment in training programmes over the past few years.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to take this opportunity to express my profound appreciation to the many public officers, especially those in the Ministry of Finance, who persevered beyond the call of duty in the preparation of the various documents laid in this Honourable House today. I would also like to thank the Honourable Prime Minister, and my Cabinet colleagues for their assistance. In addition, I would also like to say thanks to all those individuals and organizations that have provided invaluable contributions which also added considerably to the Budget process.

Economic Review

Mr. Speaker, this year's Budget is set against a robust and resilient economy. Our country has benefited from sound economic management that has brought steady growth and development and this Budget follows the long tradition of prudent economic management that has characterized this Government.

Over the past twelve months, against the backdrop of financial strains and dramatic surges in commodity prices, the global economy has confronted perhaps its most serious setback in decades. While the growth slowdown originated in the United States, precipitated by the failure in the US credit market, it quickly spread to the other industrialized countries, most notably those in Europe. Growth in developing countries also slowed, though less than in the developed countries. However, almost all developing countries continue to face significant increases in inflation, to levels not seen since the late 1980s.

Even the best performing emerging market countries were not spared. This year, in China inflation reached 6.3 percent; 11.9 percent in India and an average of 9-10 percent in Latin America. In the Caribbean region, inflation reached 16.8 percent in Jamaica, 7.4 percent in Guyana and according to the recent IMF report, inflation is projected to reach 9 percent in Barbados by the end of 2008.

This resurgence in inflation has resulted largely from the astronomical increases in food and oil prices. During 2008, the increase in global wheat prices reached 75 percent; corn prices 33 percent, dairy products and soy bean prices 63 percent, all staple ingredients in our diet.

Mr. Speaker, a number of significant global financial events have unfolded over the past few weeks. In a fundamental sense the changes taking place in the international financial system are unprecedented; with the collapse of two of the world's largest investment banks, Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch, as well as the American Insurance Group (AIG) the world's largest insurance company, being given a lifeline of US\$85 billion by the United States Government. When coupled with the bail out of Bear Stearns a few months ago, and more recently of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac – two of the largest mortgage companies in the United States-, the cumulative effect implies a major restructuring in the international financial system.

At this point no one can be certain how the on-going turbulence in the financial markets will impact Trinidad and Tobago. We fully expect oil prices to moderate as global growth subsides, but this decline in oil prices will be limited to the extent that current high prices reflect increasing production costs market fundamentals and demand from emerging and developing economies albeit at a more moderate pace.

Volatility has always been a characteristic of the oil market and our budgeting processes recognize this. It is for this reason that the oil price for the budget is determined on a moving average basis. It is our assessment that oil prices will align to market fundamentals over the medium term and therefore we do not believe that there is any need to revise the assumptions on which our budget is based.

It is perhaps heartening that Trinidad and Tobago is facing this difficult situation with significantly less macroeconomic vulnerabilities than in past episodes of financial market disruption. This country has been operating on fiscal surpluses for the past five years. In addition, we have been constantly reducing our external debt as a percentage of GDP and our exchange rate arrangements provide additional flexibility for such a situation.

Mr. Speaker, it should be noted that while our financial system is quite robust by any standard, it is still at an early stage of development. Perhaps that is our strength in this particular situation, as our exposure to the international financial system is not yet large enough and therefore minimises our vulnerability to such contagion effects.

If there is any message that the current turmoil brings, it is the critical importance for Trinidad and Tobago to tighten the regulatory regime for all financial institutions. And for all financial institutions, banks and insurance companies, the message is the need to put in place adequate risk management strategies to protect from adverse developments. I will expand on this later.

Mr. Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago economy has shown remarkable resilience in this turbulent international environment – and here are some of the salient macro-economic statistics to illustrate the point:

- GDP has almost tripled from \$55 billion in 2001 to \$152 billion in 2008. It is projected to rise to over \$165 billion in 2009. Mr. Speaker, this is an incredible performance even by global standards;
- Preliminary data show that real GDP is estimated to grow by at least 3.5 percent in 2008 which is comparable with the average global growth rate;
- While the growth in the energy sector levelled off in fiscal 2008, the non-energy sector continues to register rapid growth; in fact, for the first time in many years, the non-energy sector grew at a faster rate than the energy sector;
- Growth in the non-energy sector has been broad-based, covering construction activity, manufacturing, tourism, wholesale and retail trades and financial services, consistent with Government's economic diversification policy;
- The unemployment rate at the end of the second quarter of 2008 stood at 4.2 percent, unprecedented in our nation's history and favourably comparable with developed countries such as United States and the United Kingdom. This reflects the creation of more than 75,000 new sustainable jobs since 2002;
- Our external accounts have continued to strengthen reflecting the high oil and gas prices;

- As a result of the above, our external reserves have increased to US\$8.52 billion the equivalent of 11 months of import cover. This excludes, Mr. Speaker, the sum of US\$2.46 billion now lodged in the Heritage and Stabilization Fund, which represents more than 10.2 percent of GDP and is considerably higher than the level of our external debt.
- Today our external debt stands at 6 percent of GDP while total public sector debt is 28 percent of GDP, down from 58.3 percent in 2000.
- In macro-economic terms, Mr. Speaker, our Achilles heel has been the increase in headline inflation which rose to 11.9 percent in August and all indications are that it will continue this upward trend in the short term before falling to a more acceptable level. I will return to discuss our inflation challenge later.

Mr. Speaker our economic performance has not gone unnoticed. Just last month Standard & Poor's Ratings Services raised its long-term foreign currency sovereign credit rating of Trinidad and Tobago from 'A minus' to 'A'. Standard & Poor's also raised the country's transfer and convertibility risk assessment rating from 'AA minus' to 'AA'. According to the highly reputable international rating agency: "the upgrade reflects the continued strengthening of the Republic's fiscal and external accounts," Such a rating makes Trinidad and Tobago an extremely attractive destination for foreign direct investment.

Mr. Speaker, the Government has leveraged its favourable position in the petroleum and petrochemical sectors to fundamentally impact every facet of the Trinidad and Tobago economy. Currently we are the world's fifth largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, supplying more than 70 percent of US domestic needs. Our share of global energy business now stands at 3 percent, a remarkable accomplishment given that Trinidad and Tobago has only 0.3 percent of the world's gas reserves.

Mr. Speaker, this year marked seven years of sustained, comprehensive transformation of the education system. We provided five hundred places in ten newly constructed, state of the art, Early Childhood Care Centres (ECCE) centres. We also created an additional five hundred Advanced Level places, in furtherance of the goal of 25,000 new places by 2012; completed the deshifting of secondary schools; provided networked computer laboratories to 340 primary schools; and we trained 680 primary school teachers under the Primary Schools Computerization Programme. In addition, significant progress has been made in the areas of curriculum development and standardization, in the provision of student support services; and in teacher training and development.

Mr. Speaker, as we accelerate our efforts to transform the economy, of paramount importance is the strengthening of our human resource base, continuing our focused drive towards a knowledge and skills-based society and the facilitation of universal access to knowledge and skills training.

In 2008, more than 32,000 persons are expected to graduate from formal training institutions such as the National Energy and Skills Centre (NESC); the Trinidad and Tobago Hotel and Tourism Institute (TTHTI); the Metal Industries Company/National Skills Development Programme (MIC/NSDP); the College of Science, Technology, and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTAAT); the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT), and the University of Southern Caribbean. In addition, the National Training Agency (NTA) estimates that programmes such as On the Job Training (OJT), the Community Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP)

and the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) will have trained a further 64,145 persons.

Mr. Speaker, we have made significant progress in transforming the capital city. The 428 room Hyatt Regency, and the largest conference centre in the English-speaking Caribbean, wholly owned by the Government and people of Trinidad and Tobago, is doing remarkably and is projected to turn a profit in 2009, one full year ahead of schedule. The soon to be completed Government Campus project will provide a fully integrated, modern administrative centre to more effectively meet the changing needs of the public.

Mr. Speaker we are aware that a reliable and efficient transportation network is pivotal to a well-functioning society. In the last fiscal year we made substantial improvements to the transportation network. In December, we will bring even further relief to the travelling public with the introduction of the Water Taxi Service from San Fernando to Port-of-Spain. Inter-island transport has also been vastly improved with the purchase of the two fast ferries and the commissioning this year of modern passengers facilities at the new Port-of-Spain Ferry Terminal.

Mr. Speaker these achievements in education, training, health and infrastructure are pivotal to the shaping of the future of our nation.

THE MEDIUM TERM FRAMEWORK

Mr. Speaker, let me now on behalf of the Government outline the three year medium term policy context in which the Budget is framed. This framework assumes that:

- Real GDP growth will continue at a rate of about 5 percent a year over the period 2009-2011;
- One objective of the Budget is to reduce the rate of inflation to a sustainable level of 6 percent;
- To this end, the objective is to reduce the non-energy fiscal deficit from its current level of 16 percent of GDP to a range of 10-12 percent of GDP by fiscal 2011 as part of our strategy to ensure long term sustainability through increasing revenues from non energy sources.

Addressing Inflation and High Food Prices

Mr. Speaker, as noted earlier, headline inflation in the advanced economies, underpinned by the rise in oil prices, has greatly outstripped targeted rates and is now at the highest levels since the late 1990s. The resurgence in inflation has gone much further in developing countries, led by higher oil prices and soaring food price increases. Trinidad and Tobago, like most emerging and developing countries worldwide, has had to confront this rise in both food prices and headline inflation.

This Honourable House may recall that after reaching 10 percent in October 2006, headline inflation declined to 7.3 percent in October 2007. Since that time, which is roughly when global commodity prices began to soar, the 12-month food price index has risen to 11.9 percent as at August 2008.

Mr. Speaker, the rise in inflation in Trinidad and Tobago has both external and domestic causes.

Firstly, we are affected by global food prices which have been trending sharply upwards as a result of booming demand by some fast growing emerging economies mainly India and China; by increasing demand for biofuels and by restrictive trade policies in some countries.

Secondly, the expansion of public and private sector construction activity has pushed up the costs of labour and raw materials in the construction sector. This has led the Government to review its infrastructure development programme to arrive at adequate solutions, including new methods of financing, for example using turnkey arrangements, which would reduce capacity constraints, thus minimizing the liquidity impact and mitigating the inflationary effect on the domestic economy.

And finally public sector demand has increased as the Government has stepped up the implementation of its development programme. This has raised some challenges which I will address later. Private sector demand has also increased as evidenced by the significant growth in bank credit expansion, notwithstanding the steady hikes in domestic interest rates.

Mr. Speaker, the Government working with the Central Bank, has adopted a range of measures to deal with the surge in food prices and headline inflation. The Government has

focused on the supply side, and on initiatives in the agricultural sector that improve the efficiency of the distribution sector, most notably the establishment of farmers markets to reduce the margins between the producers and consumers. We have also eliminated or significantly reduced import duties and value added taxes on a wide variety of food items. I will also say more on this later.

Mr. Speaker, on the demand side, the Central Bank has used its monetary policy instruments including the primary and secondary reserve requirement, the Special Commercial Bank Fixed Deposit Accounts at the Central Bank, the repo rate, open market operations, issued liquidity absorption bonds on behalf of the government, sold foreign exchange, applied moral suasion and launched the Financial Literacy Programme as part of its response mechanism. In addition Mr. Speaker the Government has introduced legislation to facilitate the issuance of Treasury Bonds and increased the borrowing limits of the Central Bank.

Mr. Speaker, the Government recognizes that reducing inflation to more acceptable levels is critical to providing the right incentives for the business sector; for protecting the purchasing power and living standards of income earners and is even more critical for the protection of the lower income groups and for pensioners on fixed incomes. This Budget addresses this issue. Let me state, Mr. Speaker, that inflation reduction is an urgent economic and social imperative of this Government.

We want to renew our call to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to recommit to a sustained savings effort. We all need to understand that the culture of credit and instant gratification that has taken hold of society makes us vulnerable and ultimately impoverishes not only our selves but future generations.

We consider that the most pressing priority is to invest the country's energy wealth into creating a dynamic and diversified economy, capable of generating income well into the future. Mr. Speaker, the benefits of savings are significant. Essentially savings provide a cushion against the vagaries of the future; it ensures that we have an emergency nest egg at hand; it supplements our retirement funds and ensures that we can live comfortably in our twilight years; it secures a legacy for our children and provides funds for productive investment and the attainment of nationwide developmental goals.

For the individual and the family we have partnered with the Central Bank to launch the National Financial Literacy Programme which has proven to be a tremendous success. The Government wishes to urge every citizen to make full use of the services on offer and to manage their personal finances for maximum future return. The Government has led the way in saving as evidenced by the substantial current account balances being generated and the continued commitment to making quarterly deposits to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund which, as I indicated previously, stands at US\$2.46 billion.

In addition, the country also has US\$8.5 billion in foreign reserves, and a balance of TT\$5.1 billion in the Infrastructure Development Fund. Let me repeat, Mr. Speaker, US\$8.5 billion in foreign reserves, US\$2.46 billion in the Heritage and Stabilization Fund, and a balance of TT\$5.1 billion in the Infrastructure Development Fund.

Mr. Speaker, the temporary growth in the non-energy deficit reflects Government's prioritization of its investments in education, health, housing, and social services and in this fiscal period infrastructure becomes another one of our major priorities. We recognize that these investments generate economic growth and provide considerable impetus for the expansion of the non-energy sector.

THE SECTORAL STRATEGY

Let us now address the Government's strategy towards sectors relating to energy, agriculture, industry, tourism and financial services.

Mr. Speaker, the Energy Sector will continue to shape the economic future of Trinidad and Tobago, well into the next decade. Energy security and climate change are among the most critical challenges facing the world today. Energy security is back on the front burner of the global political agenda as increasing prices have precipitated the problems associated with energy supplies. This means that the demand for oil and gas far outweighs the supply of this limited but vital resource.

Mr. Speaker, as an oil and gas producing country, these issues are important to us and the Government understands the implications for Trinidad and Tobago, which is why the People's National Movement Administration took the decision in the early 1990s to further diversify the energy sector. Our strategy involved moving further away from an oil-based economy and propelling the economy into one in which natural gas took greater precedence. This initiative paved the way for further diversification as it created opportunities for increased downstream activities. The success of this strategy is unparalleled in our nation's history, as Trinidad and Tobago is now on the world's energy map as the fifth largest producer of Liquefied Natural Gas, and the world's largest exporter of methanol and ammonia.

Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago is responding to the changing dynamics in the global energy market. It is now necessary for us to put special arrangements in place that will bring incremental benefits to the country beyond the tax-take to Government. We propose to increase the Government's ownership of assets along the value chain in the natural gas market. The Trinidad and Tobago LNG Company will play a key role in this process. Our economic reality is that the energy sector will continue to be the main engine of growth for the next several years. The Ryder Scott report issued in early 2008 pointed to significant gas potential, which, in order to be realized, required an intensification of oil and gas exploration. Against this background, one of the Government's major priorities for 2009, and for the next few years, is to provide incentives for increased oil and gas exploration, to maximise the benefits which would accrue to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, exploration will continue in the upcoming fiscal year with the drilling of six wells, in addition to the 14 that were drilled under existing Production Sharing Contracts and Exploration and Production Licenses. A comprehensive review of the fiscal framework governing the sector is now underway and will be completed before the end of this year.

Mr. Speaker, an aggressive development programme is being undertaken by operators to bring natural gas on line for the projected growth in the demand on the domestic market. Three new field developments are in progress and two will commence shortly. In addition the Government has agreed to offer acreage in the Trinidad and Tobago Deep Atlantic Area. This activity will commence in mid 2009.

An independent certification of this country's natural gas reserves will be completed by the end of May 2009 to ensure that the data is available to enable strategic planning for the downstream natural gas sector. An independent certification of the country's oil reserves will be completed by January 2009. This will form the basis for the formulation of plans for

the development of the heavy oil reserves. These independent certifications of the country's oil and gas reserves provide key information for energy policy and decision making.

This Government is committed to ensure that local stakeholders are active participants and that all programmes are consistent with the local content policy. The success of this policy is already evident from the growing number of services that are beginning to evolve in the local segment of the industry.

Mr. Speaker, another development priority is to intensify the ongoing diversification of the energy sector. Trinidad and Tobago is moving towards a new wave of industrialization involving the further downstream utilization of natural gas.

The Methanol to Power project, as a fuel for power generation, is a joint venture between the University of Trinidad and Tobago and the Natural Gas Institute of the Americas. It involves the use of methanol, one of the safest and environmentally sound fuels, available. This project also provides an opportunity to create a "Virtual Pipeline" to supply energy to our Caribbean neighbours. The capital cost of this project is US\$1.2 billion.

The Alutrint Smelter which is scheduled to begin construction in the first quarter of 2009 is a 125,000 metric-tonnes-per-year aluminium plant which will include other operations such as rod mill and cable plants. The capital cost of this project is between US\$500 to US\$600 million and construction is scheduled to commence in the 1st quarter of 2009.

Mr. Speaker, the CariSal Caustic Soda/Calcium Chloride Plant will process a by-product salt stream from the DESALCOTT desalination plant in Point Lisas. The company will produce primarily 100,000 tonnes per year of calcium chloride. Construction of the CariSal plant has commenced and the project will take approximately 12 to 15 months to complete. It is being built on the extended Point Lisas Industrial Estate South East at a capital cost of US\$80 million.

Mr. Speaker, the Gas to Polypropylene Project involves the production of 1.6 million tonnes per year of methanol, 450,000 tonnes per year of propylene and 450,000 tonnes per year of polypropylene. The polypropylene complex is one of the cornerstones of the country's strategy to promote downstream diversification and to build the foundation for a local plastics industry. Construction of the US\$2.5 billion project is scheduled to commence in the last quarter of 2009. This will create a major plastics industry.

As this industry becomes part of the industrial landscape of Trinidad and Tobago there are now opportunities for the other Caribbean countries to diversify their economies. The opportunity exists for these countries to leverage their proximity to raw material supplies, here to create a vibrant export manufacturing sector to countries in the region, particularly North America.

Mr. Speaker, a project which is set to bring substantial revenue and employment to the country is the Isegen Maeleic Anhydride Processing Facility in Point Lisas. Maeleic Anhydride is widely used as a preservative for food and beverage products, pharmaceuticals, resins, oil additives, detergents and agricultural products. Construction of this facility is scheduled to begin in 2009 at a capital cost of US\$75 million.

Another project aimed at diversifying the economy is the construction and licensing of a plant to produce animal protein from natural gas that is a single cell protein used as an alternative to soybean. The Government has entered into a contract with UniBio Limited with a first stage pilot plant currently being installed at the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) and scheduled to be completed at the end of January 2009.

AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Mr. Speaker, our strategy for shaping the future of the agricultural sector will involve the strengthening of public/private sector collaboration at all levels and the promotion of agriculture along modern business lines.

In order to meet rising domestic demand there has been a sharp increase in food imports at escalating international market prices. This is perhaps the strongest justification for Trinidad and Tobago to increase food production and accelerate agricultural development, as urgent national priorities aimed at economic diversification and inflation protection.

Mr. Speaker, the Government is committed to ensuring the rapid development of agriculture. Our approach is grounded in the view that before the year 2020, agriculture must be competitive and possess the capacity to sustain competitiveness by becoming resilient, adaptive, technological in focus and market driven. While increasing prices are a major concern to the consumer they can provide a boost to investment and incomes in the sector, particularly in the rural communities. We consider increasing agricultural production as essential to mitigating food price inflation and providing the linkages among other sectors of the economy. In addition, it provides an incentive for private involvement in downstream agri-business.

The Government recognizes the growing importance of the agri-business sector for national development and has increased its investment in the sector from approximately \$1.2 billion in the last fiscal year to an unprecedented \$1.7 billion for this new Budget.

Streamlining Institutional Arrangements

Mr. Speaker the Government has adopted a new and focused approach to agriculture, based on streamlining institutional arrangements to better foster and coordinate the financing, production and marketing arrangements that are key for a competitive agricultural sector. To this end, for cohesion and efficiency of related agencies, the Executive Chairman of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) has also been appointed to chair the Estate Management and Business Development (EMBD) and the Agricultural Development Bank.

Further, in an effort to assess in a timely manner agricultural applications for State lands and to establish leases in the shortest possible timeframe, all state lands for agricultural purposes will be transferred to the EMBD. The EMBD will thereafter establish sub-leases with eligible applicants for all usage of state land for agricultural purposes. All allocations of State Lands will now be subject to Cabinet decision making.

Mr. Speaker, in fulfilling its commitment to the former employees of Caroni Ltd the Government has issued 6,600 licences to enable the former employees access to two acre plots of land for agricultural purposes. With respect to residential lots, a total of 22,799 lots

are being developed. From this amount 5,043 will be allocated to the former employees of Caroni Ltd and the balance of 17,756 will be allocated to the general public. Priority in the distribution of agricultural plots not allocated to former Caroni workers will be given to graduates of the University of the West Indies (UWI), the Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture and Forestry (ECIAF) and graduates of the Youth Apprenticeship Programme in Agriculture (YAPPA). The cost of developing the residential lots amounted to \$590 million and \$600 million for the development of the agricultural plots.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to make agricultural credit more easily available to our farmers. Accordingly, the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) two years ago, reduced its lending rate from 12 percent to 6 percent and in the case of former Caroni workers to 5 percent. The Bank has also adjusted its collateral requirements to facilitate farmers. For instance, former Caroni workers can use their licenses and not only leases as collateral to access loan funding. To assist the Bank in this effort the Government increased its allocation to the Bank from \$75 million to \$100 million in fiscal 2008. We propose to increase the allocation to the ADB to \$125 million in the new fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, the Government in its drive to increase food production has set a target of a minimum percentage of production of all the food groups to achieve a balanced diet. These include staples, pulses, vegetables, fruits, food from animals, fats and oils that are to be met by local production. Incentives will be provided for the production of these food groups in the large farms.

The Tucker Valley Large Farm Project is being implemented through a technical cooperation agreement between the Governments of Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago. The 200 acre farm began operation in June 2008. When fully operational, it will employ crop rotation and intensive land utilization practices. The target for this farm is 4,000 tons of agricultural produce per year, inclusive of fruits, vegetables, root crops and grains. Mr. Speaker, the first output from this project is expected in the last quarter of 2008.

It is envisaged that the Tucker Valley Farming Model will provide the fillip for the private sector to aggressively pursue agricultural entrepreneurial activities by capitalizing on the mix of programmes and incentives provided by the Government. This includes the development of other mega-farms, while simultaneously encouraging small-scale agriculture and other activities which can assist in the efforts at food security.

Mr. Speaker, work on the development of the PCS Nitrogen 75 acre demonstration and training large farm with its three green houses, is well underway and crop production in pawpaw, tomatoes, sweet peppers and cassava is due to begin next month.

The Government will continue to support traditional small and medium size private farms through a range of incentives including soft loan facilities, expanded extension services and a comprehensive program of training for farmers. Production by the large farms will be coordinated to minimise supply and demand mismatch. The large farms will continue to concentrate on the production of root crops, legumes, grains, specialty vegetables and export crops, while private small farms will focus on traditional crops, leafy vegetables, fruit and some export commodities.

Agricultural Access Roads

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with our commitment to deliver goods and services in a more efficient and cost effective manner the Government will intensify the implementation of the National Agribusiness Development Programme, which in collaboration with the new Roads Authority, will also upgrade and expand the road network to farmlands throughout the country.

This will ensure that rural access roads are improved and this will give a tremendous boost to productivity in the agricultural sector. Not only will productivity be enhanced, but the marketing of produce will also be upgraded, resulting in increased incomes to farmers, and an improvement to their quality of life.

Praedial Larceny

Mr. Speaker, praedial larceny is one of the greatest scourges that plague our agricultural sector and is a definite disincentive to potential investors in the sector. The Government will be taking stringent measures to put an end to this illegal activity.

At the National Consultation on Food Prices last year, a new arrangement including support from private security services was announced to treat with the question of Praedial Larceny. That solution was reviewed and it will now include a comprehensive and expansionary approach to the problem. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources will expand on the new approach in his contribution to the Budget Debate.

INDUSTRY

Mr. Speaker, the Government of Trinidad & Tobago has targeted seven strategic industries to be part of a plan for national industrial growth and diversification. These include the Food and Beverage Industry, the Printing and Packaging Industry, The Maritime Industry, the Yachting Industry, the Sea Food Industry, and the Film Industry and the Entertainment Industry. The Government will work together with the private sector to develop these industries so that they become substantive contributors to the nation's Gross Domestic Product and major pillars in shaping our nation's future. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Trade and Industry will expand on all of these in his contribution to the Budget Debate.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to these targeted seven industries, we are also developing the Tamana InTech Industrial and Technology Park. The Park when completed will provide incubator facilities, research and training in Information Technology and assist in expanding the nation's non-energy export base by facilitating industrial expansion downstream from the energy sector. Additionally, we are developing new Industrial Parks at Dow Village and Endeavour Road, Chaguanas to meet the need for light industrial space and facilities.

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with our vision of making Trinidad and Tobago a preferred destination for investment, the Government will stimulate increased investment through the implementation of a new Investment Policy. The draft policy document will be submitted for public comment in 2009.

Mr. Speaker, after several unsuccessful attempts, the Government after reviewing the Singapore Model, proposes to establish a Business and Investment Secretariat (BISTT) which will be the single window for investment facilitation in Trinidad and Tobago. The establishment of such a facility will improve administrative efficiency and allow investors to access information on the necessary steps to establish a business and provide services to expedite the granting of necessary permits and licenses required for investment. It will

therefore deliver substantial savings in time and cost to potential and existing investors thereby facilitating new investments.

THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL CENTRE (TTIFC)

Mr Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has emerged as a major economic centre of the region. We intend to leverage this success and to establish Port of Spain as an important international financial centre. Independent consultants have already confirmed our judgment that our current financial reputation, our legal system and our ideal location make this country attractive for international banks and investment firms interested in fostering business in the wider Caribbean and in Latin America.

The Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre will create a wide range of employment opportunities in the financial services sector and other ancillary services. It will provide an enabling environment for local and international financial institutions specializing in the following business lines:

- commodities trading
- asset management
- insurance and reinsurance services
- international loans syndication
- back-office activities.

In addition, to determining the business lines, new legislation governing the TTIFC shall be laid in Parliament early in the new fiscal year. The Government has also contracted international consultants to make recommendations on an appropriate tax, legal and regulatory framework and it is expected that the report will be submitted shortly. The TTIFC Management Company will be established next month to manage and promote the TTIFC. The building designated to house the TTIFC is close to completion and will be outfitted with cutting edge technology and first class office facilities.

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with the establishment of the TTIFC, we have embarked on a financial sector reform programme with proposed amendments to the Financial Institutions Act, 1993. These amendments promote financial deepening, stability, and development, geared toward correcting identified weaknesses in the current regulatory framework. The legislation will be laid in Parliament before the end of the year.

The Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre will be a catalyst for the development of our local human capital through the transfer of knowledge and expertise from global financial institutions. The TTIFC will create high quality jobs for our university graduates. We are partnering with the Ministry of Science Technology and Tertiary Education to prepare future graduates with the skill sets to match the needs of the TTIFC.

Mr. Speaker the Government will also establish a Special Purpose Economic Zone (SPEZ) to ensure that the environment within which TTIFC participants operate is internationally competitive while protecting Trinidad and Tobago's national interests and reputation. The SPEZ will have special taxation levels for defined time periods, appropriate legal and regulatory conditions and dispute resolution mechanisms. The SPEZ benefits shall be made available to all participants operating in the designated TTIFC location with provision for exceptions to locate in other areas available on request.

Similarly, the Securities Industry Act, 1995 which is soon to be replaced by a new Securities Act, comprising inputs from both the general public and key stakeholders, will provide

requisite support for a modern Securities Market. The new Securities Act to be laid in Parliament before the end of this year, will provide for a more effective and encompassing regulatory regime in greater alignment with international best practice as set out by the International Organization of Securities Commissions ("IOSCO"). Essentially, the new Securities Act will make the Trinidad and Tobago's capital market significantly more attractive to both foreign and local investors.

In January this year, the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago launched a secondary market for government securities, a key milestone in the deepening of capital markets. We view this development as a critical ingredient in our nation's financial infrastructure. Such secondary markets provide enhanced market-making opportunities for government securities and act as a primer to other fixed income securities markets.

Mr. Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre dovetails with Government's Vision 2020. We are optimistic that in our steadfast endeavours aimed at global repositioning, we can truly forge an economic space with depth and breadth, and interface more efficiently with the international financial system.

In summary Mr. Speaker, the TTIFC will create sustainable employment, contribute to the country's GDP, earn foreign exchange and strengthen the domestic capital market.

TOURISM

Mr. Speaker, the tourism industry is another sector which provides an ideal opportunity in which we can shape our future together. Consequently, the development of the tourism industry will be based on the rich talent of our people and the unique culture of Trinidad and Tobago. It will be people-centred and private sector-driven and facilitated by Government's policy for the sector. It will also depend on the contributions of the craftsmen, coconut vendors, taxi drivers, lifeguards, doubles vendors and hotel workers.

Mr. Speaker, we are well on the way to creating a diversified and sustainable tourism product. In addition to the traditional brand of sun, sea and sand, we have taken the decision to capitalise on our development efforts in the financial services sector and this has presented us with an opportunity to now focus on business conventions and conference hosting. In addition, given our country's rich and diverse environment, opportunities abound in eco-adventure, sport, history and cultural tourism. And this new focus is already beginning to show positive payoffs judging from the increasing number of prestigious conferences that are being held in Port of Spain. And as you know, Mr. Speaker we are preparing for two major international meetings next year: the Summit of the Americas in April 2009, and the Commonwealth of Heads of Government Meeting in November 2009. In addition, Mr. Speaker, the First Caribbean Games which we will also host next year will now be a world event having regard to the performance of Caribbean teams in the recently concluded Beijing Olympic games.

Mr. Speaker, Tourism is a US\$8 trillion global industry and we have been able to attract more than 560,000 visitors to our shores last year and we expect to surpass this number in 2008. In keeping with the Government's Vision 2020 target, tourism represents significant opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago for revenue, employment, entrepreneurship, investment, foreign exchange earnings, linkages with other sectors, and new export markets.

Mr. Speaker, the resurgence of the tourism industry owes much to the more attractive environment that has been created for both foreign and local investment in new hotel

capacity. The existing room stock is now being upgraded to internationally competitive standards and we are establishing a critical mass of new rooms. In 2008, over 500 high quality rooms were added with the opening of the Hyatt Regency and the 83 room Holiday Inn Express. Three more hotels are in the final stages of construction, the 165 room Carlton Savannah, the 120 room Star Hotel, and the 52 five-star rooms at the Academy for the Performing Arts. In addition, the Trinidad Hilton is undergoing a major upgrade which will increase its complement to 420 rooms. At least four other major hotel projects are on the drawing board. Mr. Speaker, we are also working with several major airlines to maintain and increase the availability of affordable airline seats.

Mr. Speaker, our tourism product will be enhanced with the development of the Maracas Beach Facility. The stakeholder consultation process has been completed and the Certificate of Environmental Clearance has been obtained paving the way for a contract to be awarded for the design and construction phase of the project. The old seaside pavilion and lifeguard towers have been demolished and the entire project to upgrade the Facility will be completed in 2010. Further, the Government has embarked on a programme to upgrade and restore all heritage sites and beaches including Las Cuevas, Vessigny, Mayaro and Manzanilla.

Mr. Speaker, if we are to be considered a favoured tourist or convention destination, we need to enhance our reputation for service; we need to see the business opportunities that are inherent in the development of our art and culture and we need to market our talents effectively. The Government will expand training opportunities for all stakeholders involved in the tourism industry and will involve these stakeholders in the planning, development and marketing of our tourism product. A draft tourism policy has been completed and consultations on its content will begin shortly.

TOBAGO

Mr. Speaker, I wish now to turn to Tobago and the Tobago House of Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, over the last seven years, Tobago has experienced tremendous progress and prosperity. All the available economic development indicators show that Tobago is a much better place to live than it was seven years ago, with Tobagonians sharing in the prosperity that is evident across this nation.

Mr. Speaker, to illustrate briefly,

- Tobago's unemployment rate is now just over 3.5 percent;
- The tourism sector remains buoyant with hotel and guest house occupancy rates now 70 percent, compared to the 17 percent of 2001;
- International passenger arrivals have risen from 49,645 in 2001 to 66,266 in 2007;
- Domestic tourism is also booming, since the introduction of the fast ferries, with passenger travel on the sea bridge increasing from 351,358 in 2001 to 813,644 in 2007 and expected to reach one million this year; and
- There has also been significant business expansion, with a continuing boom in the construction sector.

If I may say so, the progress and prosperity which Tobago currently enjoys could not have taken place without the harmonious mature relationship that has developed in the past seven years between the Tobago House of Assembly and Central Government.

Looking ahead, we are again encouraged by the Assembly's budget proposals for the next fiscal year, especially with those proposals that aim at sustaining the progress and prosperity on the island, through economic expansion and diversification; increased social equity and justice; and improving current governance arrangements in order to facilitate even greater collaboration between the Assembly and the Central Government.

Mr. Speaker, among the many initiatives for Tobago, included in this budget are:

- New arrangements with respect to stamp duty, to facilitate the inter-generational transfer of land among Tobagonians, as well as among citizens in the rest of the country;
- Extension of the Charlotteville Jetty;
- Construction of the new market at Shaw Park;
- Completion of the acquisition of Friendship Estate;
- Completion of the Shaw Park Cultural Complex;
- The completion of the Scarborough Library, now expected by the end of this calendar year;
- The construction of the Roxborough Administrative Complex;
- The construction of the Roxborough mini-hospital; and
- Resumption of work on the new Scarborough Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, the Government remains resolutely committed to ensuring that the progress and prosperity which Tobago currently enjoys, is sustained, as we together work side-by-side to achieve developed country status by 2020. The Government stands ready to provide the Tobago House of Assembly with all the support that it needs to continue the important development work that is currently being undertaken on the island.

In the next fiscal year, the people of Tobago will have access to budgetary resources in the order of \$2,650 million, up from \$2,238 million in the last fiscal year, comprising an allocation of \$1,593 million to facilitate the recurrent expenditures of the Assembly; and \$400 million for development programme expenditures and a further \$657 million to be provided for under the Heads of Recurrent and Capital Expenditures for expenditures for Tobago. Mr. Speaker Tobago received virtually everything they requested in this fiscal year.

BUDGET PRIORITIES

Mr. Speaker, it is clear that our rapid pace of development and our concerted efforts to improve the quality of life of our population have brought to the fore a number of capacity bottlenecks. There is no doubt, for instance, that the expansion of employment, higher incomes and easier credit availability have led to an increase in demand for automobiles contributing to traffic congestion. Rapid economic growth and increased housing availability have put pressure on the public utilities, notably water and electricity, challenges not unique to countries at a similar stage of development.

Mr. Speaker, notwithstanding the considerable efforts of the Government, the proliferation of the trade in illegal drugs and the erosion of traditional family values have led to a level of criminality which is intolerable, unacceptable and which we all, government, business and law-abiding citizens must continue to address with ever increasing vigour.

Mr. Speaker, the spending allocations and the measures included in the budget are designed to deal with these challenges. We will continue our programmes in Infrastructure, Education, Health, Social Services, and National Security and will place greater emphasis on Infrastructure this year, to the benefit of our national community and to the future of our nation.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Speaker, our development efforts will be supported by a substantial increase in infrastructure which will add impetus to broad based growth, enhance productivity across all sectors and create opportunities for significant segments of the economy. Investment in modern physical infrastructure, water, electricity, and telecommunications will generate substantial economic returns. There is also a strong social imperative, when we consider the multi-pronged benefits of modern infrastructure. It is for these reasons that infrastructure is the number one priority for the 2009 budget.

Mr. Speaker, our rapid rate of growth has made the significant expansion in our infrastructure facilities a major priority. This Government is in the process of developing first world quality services for water distribution, waste disposal, power generation, telecommunication, transportation and drainage.

As we proceed with our infrastructure programme we propose to utilize the Public Private Partnership approach particularly for the National Highways Programme and Rapid Rail Transit System. This approach will address the potential for capacity constraints, and inefficiencies.

The scope of works and design for the National Highways Programme projects will be bundled into packages so as to streamline resource requirements thereby improving efficiency. The project execution arrangements for both the Highways and the Rapid Rail projects will involve the Design, Build, Finance, Operate, Maintain and Transfer model thus minimizing the possibility of cost overruns due to fixed prices associated with the arrangement. In this approach, payments will only commence when the project is completed and will be phased over a period thus mitigating any potential inflationary consequences. Predictability of resource flows and aggressive procurement practices will also make public spending much more efficient.

Mr. Speaker, the Government's White Paper on the Reform of the Public Sector Procurement Regime sought to address the deficiencies and weaknesses of the present

public sector procurement and the Central Tenders Board Ordinance 1961 including lack of uniformity of procedures across agencies; absence of standardization; and a perceived lack of transparency and accountability.

We propose to (i) provide online procurement in the form of an e-government platform for tendering process as well as the dissemination of procurement information to the general public; and (ii) strengthen the present public sector procurement tender rules and (iii) standardize the rules and processes to be used by the State Enterprises.

Water and Sewerage

Mr. Speaker, the Government re-affirms its commitment to providing the people of Trinidad and Tobago with a safe and reliable supply of water comparable to that of any developed country. Over the next several years, the highest priority will be given to improving the quality of service delivered to the country by our water authority.

In May 2007 a Consulting firm was contracted to develop a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of the water and wastewater sectors, including a review of the organizational requirements for the subsequent delivery of the water programme.

The resulting Master Plan and Policy for the water and wastewater sectors is a revolutionary step to address the various problems that have frustrated the adequate provision of water and wastewater services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago for many years. The full extent of the Plan is expected to be completed by November 2008.

Mr. Speaker, the key elements of this Strategic Water Supply Plan are:

- i. The construction of 5 large Desalination Plants in the Point Fortin area, Chaguaramas, Ortoire, Point Lisas and Tobago; and the expansion of the existing plant as well as a plant to be constructed by the private sector;
- ii. The construction of the Moruga Dam;
- iii. The construction of a National Water Transmission Grid which would allow for greater flexibility in the transmission and distribution of water to areas in need;
- iv. The implementation of an aggressive Demand Management Programme (Universal Metering); and
- v. The completion of the Beetham Water Re-Use Project. And at least two more similar plant in San Fernando and Central Trinidad.

Mr. Speaker, the Government will invest approximately \$10 billion over the next 5 years to complete these projects.

Power Generation

Mr. Speaker, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is fundamentally shifting its energy and power generation strategy away from simply meeting existing demand, to providing the infrastructure to meet and surpass the growing present and future demand for electricity. This new strategy will result in a review of all existing plans for power generation. This review will be completed shortly.

In 2009 T&TEC will complete the installation of new digital electricity meters through the Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) project which will improve accuracy in customer's bills; eliminate estimated billings; allow faster detection and restoration of outages; and allow wireless reading of meters. T&TEC will also replace its obsolete microwave radio

communication system with a modern Fibre Optic Cable Network. This would provide the Commission with a reliable telecommunication backbone to monitor and minimize potential outages. In keeping with international best practices, all cables will be laid underground.

Telecommunication Sector

Mr. Speaker, exciting times lie ahead for the telecommunications sector.

The Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) will upgrade its obsolete copper plants in East and South Trinidad and in Tobago to fibre optics to provide advanced services. TSTT will also deploy a robust technologically savvy network - including Fibre to the Home (FTTH), Fibre to the Node or neighbourhood (FTTN), and WiMAX networks to enhance existing services and provide new services, including faster internet connectivity to homes and businesses, video conferencing, security services & Internet Protocol Television (IPTV). This will also facilitate the implementation of Closed Circuit Television Technology throughout the country. In addition, TSTT will increase its international and regional connectivity and bandwidth to provide always on, everywhere, anytime connectivity. Mr. Speaker we expect that all this would be completed in 2013. All TSTT cable will be placed underground. Mr. Speaker, TSTT will provide the service, you will choose the speed. The speed of transactions will be phenomenal, matching and even exceeding that of developed countries.

Mr. Speaker, this transformation will also provide our citizens with equal access to cutting edge technology including easy access to Government e-services. For instance you will no longer need to leave your community to come to the capital city to pay bills and conduct business. In addition, you will be able to download immigration forms or income tax return forms either from your home or from your laptop on the move. The technology will also provide e-security; connectivity through mobile telephones, laptops and television and will improve overall customer service. Mr. Speaker this is user-friendly technology at its best and takes Trinidad and Tobago to the next level of telecommunications.

Transportation

Mr. Speaker, the Government will continue to invest in modern transportation infrastructure utilising the latest technology, and the highest standards of quality, aesthetics and functionality. Our objective is to develop and maintain a multimodal public transport system utilising a variety of mass transit solutions and a comprehensive integrated road network to provide safe, convenient, affordable and efficient transportation to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Churchill Roosevelt / Uriah Butler Highway Interchange

Mr. Speaker, due to the significant loss in manpower hours and productivity caused by delays on the nation's highways, the Government is moving apace to construct an Interchange at the nation's busiest intersection, i.e. the intersection of the Churchill Roosevelt and Uriah Butler Highways.

The construction of this impressive structure is being implemented in three phases. Phase I, which is already complete, entails the south to west ramp from the Uriah Butler Highway to the Churchill Roosevelt Highway, which is already in use. Phase 2 involves the construction of the elevated west to south bridge, from the Churchill Roosevelt Highway to the Uriah Butler Highway, in the vicinity of the Grand Bazaar, and the Bamboo village flyover. This phase is nearing completion and will be put into service early in 2009.

Phase 3 involves the construction of the remaining sections of the Interchange, including the realignment of the Uriah Butler Highway, together with a 6-lane overpass over the Churchill Roosevelt Highway and all other necessary service roads and flyovers. Construction of this final phase is expected to commence in 2009, and when complete, the intersection of the Uriah Butler Highway and the Churchill Roosevelt Highway will be completely grade-separated, without any traffic conflicts or traffic lights whatsoever. This process of modernisation of our highway infrastructure through the construction of flyovers will continue to the east along the Churchill Roosevelt Highway with the construction of grade separated intersections at Valsayn, UWI, Macoya, Trincity and so on.

In addition, in order to ensure that traffic can flow freely from Port-of-Spain to San Fernando along the Churchill Roosevelt Highway, it is the Government's intention to award contracts in 2009 for the construction of flyovers and service roads that will allow the removal of the traffic lights at El Socorro and Aranguez.

Coastal Water Taxi Service

Mr. Speaker, the primary objective for the implementation of the Coastal Water Taxi Service is to provide commuters with an alternative and efficient means of transport between the cities of Port of Spain and San Fernando and the Borough of Point Fortin.

Mr. Speaker, Phase 1 of the water taxi service between Port of Spain and San Fernando is at an advanced stage. The physical infrastructure for the temporary on-shore and off-shore terminal facilities at San Fernando, including car parking, passenger waiting area, and berthing facilities is virtually complete. The completion of the Port-of-Spain docking area is also on target for the proposed start-up of the service before the end of December 2008. Four interim vessels have been acquired, three of which are already in the country, with the fourth vessel now on its way to Curacao for refurbishment works. A marine operator has been selected, and final arrangements are being made for ticketing and other administrative matters. This service will reduce travel time between San Fernando and Port-of-Spain at peak times from the current 2 hours to just 45 minutes. Phase 2 of this service will involve an expansion of the service to docking areas in Clifton Hill in Point Fortin, Waterloo/Orange Valley in Chaguanas, Invaders Bay, Point Cumana and Chaguaramas in the Western Peninsula.

The Trinidad Rapid Rail Transit System

Mr. Speaker the Trinidad and Tobago Rapid Rail Transit system will further revolutionise the transport network in this country.

In April this year, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the Trinitrain consortium, a consortium of firms, lead by the French firm Bouygues, signed the contract to bring the Rapid Rail System to reality. The project will involve the construction of two express train lines with a total length of 105 kilometres. One line will link the nation's capital Port-of-Spain to San Fernando, while the other will run from Sangre Grande in the East to Diego Martin in the West.

Mr. Speaker, the project will be completed in 4 Phases and Phase I, which entails the Planning and Design Phase, is scheduled to be completed in February 2010. Construction of the railway system will commence shortly thereafter and financing for the project will take the form of a Public-Private Partnership, or P3 model, using the Design, Build, Finance, Operate, Maintain, and Transfer model. When completed, our citizens will be able to travel

by rail in air-conditioned comfort from Port-of-Spain to San Fernando in less than half an hour.

Public Transport Service Corporation

The Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC) has embarked on the final stage of its Fleet Expansion and Modernisation Programme. As a result of an aggressive fleet renewal programme over the last 5 years, the PTSC now has over 300 buses at its disposal for use on over 100 routes in Trinidad and Tobago. This represents an increase of over 250 percent in the number of working buses in the country over the last 5 years. The next and final phase will increase the number of available buses to 400, which will adequately satisfy travel demand during peak hours and significantly increase the frequency of existing services. It should be noted that the PTSC is far ahead of schedule in achieving its mandate under our 2020 Vision Plan. The transformation of the PTSC over the last 5 years represents yet another area where this Government is on track to achieve developed country status.

Mr. Speaker, the vehicle maintenance culture of the Corporation has become more client-centred, fully responsive to the service delivery needs of the commuting public, and vehicle maintenance is being outsourced to other agencies, such as VMCOTT, thus allowing the PTSC to concentrate on its core function of providing efficient and affordable public transportation. The PTSC will also establish 'Park and Ride' Facilities in Arima, San Fernando, Rio Claro and Point Fortin to encourage more car owners to use public transport. In addition, the PTSC compound at South Quay in Port of Spain will be totally reconstructed to provide a more modern and efficient environment for the travelling public.

National Highways Programme

Mr. Speaker, the modern mass transit solutions that I have just outlined are just part of the comprehensive matrix of transportation initiatives that this Government is implementing. In addition to our Rapid Railway, Water Taxi and new Bus Services, the Government is about to embark on the most far-reaching and innovative highway development programmes that this country has ever witnessed. Using the design, construct, finance operate, maintain, and transfer model, a comprehensive new national highway grid will be constructed over the next 8 years. When completed, it will allow our citizens to travel by car from any one area of Trinidad to any other area of Trinidad under 2 ½ hours.

The projects will be completed in phases and include the following:

Phase 1

- (I) Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin/La Brea (SHH);
- (II) San Fernando to Princes Town Freeway;
- (III) New Freeway from Uriah Butler Highway to Trincity ;
- (IV) Churchill Roosevelt Highway Extension to Manzanilla (CRH);
- (V) Causeway from Port of Spain to Chaguaramas; and
- (VI) A New North-South Highway from the East-West Corridor, in the vicinity of Curepe / Tunapuna, to the Princes Town/Rio Claro area

Phase 2

- (I) A First Class Road/Tunnel from the East-West Corridor, in the vicinity of Curepe /Tunapuna, to the North Coast
- (II) A Freeway from Princes Town to Mayaro
- (III) A First Class Road/Highway from Moruga to Princes Town

Phase 3

- (I) A First Class Road/Highway from Sangre Grande to Toco
- (II) A First Class Road from Blanchisseuse to Toco
- (III) A Highway from Penal to Guayaguayare
- (IV) A Highway from Manzanilla to Mayaro

The new highways are being designed to international freeway standards and will comprise both new 6-lane carriageways and widening of existing 2-lane carriageways to 4 lanes, and will be implemented using the P3 Model. The P3 model is a form of collaboration between governments and private companies that aims to improve public services and infrastructure, in a manner which captures the benefits of private sector involvement (such as cost- and time-savings) while maintaining public accountability, and is expected to result in rapid implementation of the new highway programme.

Further, in order to attract competent and experienced P3 contractors, it is intended to bundle the National Highways Programme projects outlined above into packages large enough to create the necessary critical mass to make it feasible for such Contractors to establish operations in Trinidad and Tobago. The estimated cost of the first phase of the programme is TT\$15 billion, with the overall programme expected to cost approximately \$25 billion over the 8-year period of construction.

National Roads Authority

Mr. Speaker, as an integral part of the larger objective for road sector reform in Trinidad and Tobago, the Government will convert the Highways Division into a Roads Authority, and also bring all other roads in the country, including Agricultural Access Roads and Secondary Roads, under this new authority. The Roads Authority will contribute to bringing about significant improvements in the management of the road network and reduce the ongoing costs of maintenance.

Drainage

Mr. Speaker, the Government will continue to invest in first class drainage and irrigation infrastructure to reduce the frequency and severity of flooding and erosion, to eliminate of the consequent health and environmental hazards, and to end salt water intrusion in agricultural areas.

The Mamoral Dam and Reservoir Project will be launched shortly to solve the flooding in the Caparo/Mamoral area. This project is a key part of the wider Caparo River Basin Flood

Mitigation and Water Resources Development Project. The construction of the Mamoral Dam and Reservoir Project is expected to positively impact the industrial, agricultural, construction and real estate sectors. The project will also involve associated river re-alignment, road re-alignment and bridge construction.

Mr. Speaker, numerous Drainage & Irrigation projects are either in the planning, evaluation or construction stages, including a Comprehensive National Drainage Development Study involving the City of Port of Spain; Coastal Protection Works; the North Oropouche River Basin; the Ortoire River Basin; and the South Oropouche River Basin.

In addition, the Government has embarked on a National Programme to upgrade all major Drainage Channels in Trinidad and Tobago and a Flood Mitigation & Erosion Control Programme for the Caroni and L'Anse Mitran Rivers as well as major improvement works on the Tunapuna, Tacarigua, Matura and Alley's Creeks rivers, among many others. An aggressive programme of drain and river clearing is currently underway and the objective is to ensure that no effort is spared to alleviate flooding in Trinidad and Tobago. Further, to consolidate, monitor and manage the Government's National Drainage Program, we shall establish a Drainage Authority with full oversight of all drainage networks throughout the country and with the mandate to find effective solutions to the country's flooding problems.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Speaker, in recognizing the socio-economic importance of environmental balance and ecosystem stability, the Government in conjunction with relevant stakeholders will continue to ensure the environmental integrity of Trinidad and Tobago. As a result, the Government has been actively developing and implementing policies and programmes geared towards the preservation of the biological resources and the prevention of all forms of pollution.

Mr. Speaker, solid waste is generally disposed of by land filling but there has been a significant reduction in capacity at Beetham, Forres Park, Guanapo and Studley Park landfills. Through the National Environment Policy, the Government has made a commitment to encourage the recovery of waste, including recycling, reuse or reclamation.

To this end the Government will revoke the Beverage Container Bill and seek the assistance of the Province of Nova Scotia, Canada to develop appropriate legislation for the establishment of a general waste recycling system for Trinidad and Tobago as opposed to a system for only one waste stream.

It is expected that the legislation would include, but not be limited to, provisions for the establishment of an independent statutory authority within the Ministry of Local Government. The Authority will administer the proposed waste recycling system; make regulations regarding return/deposits on several different streams of recyclable materials including beverage containers, paper, used tyres and glass bottles; and make provisions for the establishment of a system of environmental collection depots.

Mr. Speaker, as part of Government's move to increase efficiency at all levels within the economy, we propose to restructure the Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL) in order to concentrate on its core mandate of waste management, including waste water management, which will be transferred from WASA. Therefore, the administration of CEPEP has been removed from SWMCOL and will be managed by a special purpose company established for that specific purpose.

The Green Fund

Mr. Speaker, through the Green Fund, the Government is partnering with the private sector and community groups to ensure that the environment will be conserved and enhanced for the benefit of future generations. The Green Fund Executing Unit commenced operations on the second of this month and has started a comprehensive marketing and communications campaign which will serve primarily to introduce the Green Fund to the public, raise awareness about the Fund, the work it does and how one can apply to the Green Fund.

The programmes undertaken through the Green Fund will foster community integration, youth development and national pride, as our citizens participate in the protection, restoration and preservation of our natural environment and wildlife.

The Fund now stands at approximately \$1.5 billion and the Green Fund Executing Unit will work with and make grants available to community based organisations and non-governmental organisations for remediation, reforestation and conservation projects. The approved projects will be monitored, evaluated and given the support necessary to ensure best practices and efficient use of resources so that together, we can protect Trinidad and Tobago's environment.

EDUCATION

Mr. Speaker, the Government recognizes that a sound education system is the strongest catalyst for national development, poverty reduction and the building of an inclusive society. A solid education system is pivotal to the attainment of the Vision 2020 developmental priority of "developing an innovative people", "a highly skilled, well-educated people aspiring to a local culture of excellence that is driven by equal access to learning opportunities".

The Government's policy of providing access to education from nursery to tertiary demands that we accelerate the construction programme for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres, primary and secondary schools. We will build 150 new Early Childhood Care and Education centres (ECCE); commence preparatory works for a further 150 Centres and refurbish existing Early Childhood Care and Education centres (ECCE) centres. Construction and upgrade works will also begin shortly at 26 replacement primary schools. The objective of the Government is to complete the construction of 600 of these centres and achieve universal Early Childhood Care Education by 2012.

Mr. Speaker, the Government will ensure that all schools achieve 100 percent implementation of the revised primary school curriculum for Science and Social Studies as well as commence revisions for Physical Education and Sports subjects. In addition, 100 percent implementation is targeted for the revised curriculum for eight core secondary schools subjects. We will also implement the National Certificate of Secondary Education (NCSE) Level II in all public and private schools. We will also introduce Spanish language studies at 60 primary schools in 2009, as well as expand the Caribbean Vocational Qualification subject offerings into 30 more schools.

We shall also be training staff and outfitting 133 secondary schools to use Classroom Collaborative Information and Communications Technology (ICT) systems.

We have introduced a School Leadership Programme in some of our schools to reduce the level of violence and indiscipline. This programme is intended to help principals and teachers deal with stress and help parents deal with issues involved in parenting. In the last fiscal year 1,365 primary school students, 27,000 secondary school students and 390

parents benefitted from this Programme. In the new fiscal year we will continue to undertake projects at primary schools, conduct workshops with secondary school teachers and complete more cycles of Parent Education training all in an effort to strengthen the collaboration among the stakeholders in shaping the future of our nation's children.

Mr. Speaker, the School Feeding Programme was established to improve the nutritional status of our children while at the same time promote linkages with the domestic agriculture sector. More than half of all students in the country's 883 schools benefit daily from meals through the Programme. We will expand the programme in 2009 to cover 75 percent of the targeted school population at a cost of \$240 million.

The Government's Textbook Rental/Loan Programme provides textbooks and other educational resources for core curriculum areas to students at all public schools. In the last fiscal year a total of 257,795 students benefitted from this Programme. In the new fiscal year the Programme will be reviewed to increase its efficiency and it is expected that 300,000 students will benefit.

Mr. Speaker, in the new fiscal year we shall strengthen the legislative and regulatory framework of our education system. The proposed legislation will include a revised Education Act and amended Local School Board Regulations.

School Boards

Mr. Speaker, the formation of Local School Boards is part of the movement toward school based management and the involvement of the community in the life of the school in its area. The Government views the implementation of School Boards as a strategy for enhancing school governance in Trinidad and Tobago. It is a powerful mechanism for shaping the well-being of our future generations. The School Boards have moved the schools and communities toward the forefront of the education sector and is an extremely successful model of collaborative work. The formation of School Boards and the implementation of school based management have enhanced the effectiveness and efficiency of schools.

Today Local School Boards have been established in all Government secondary schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago. They engage in activities and projects in support of the development of their schools. These activities range from improving, enhancing or beautifying the physical environment of the school, to promoting the discipline and self-esteem of the students. The Boards also engage in projects that showcase the talents of the students in their respective communities. The Government is now in the process of institutionalizing the Boards at the secondary level and ensuring their effectiveness and sustainability.

Tertiary Education and Training

Mr. Speaker, Government is committed to ensuring that the next generation of our citizens has the opportunity to excel in an increasingly competitive world. Our goal is to increase the percentage of tertiary graduates from the 11 percent of the population as recorded in 2000 to at least 60 percent by 2015 which is the average for most developed states. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report to this Honourable House that approximately 40 percent of our population has achieved tertiary education and we are well on the way to achieving the goal of 60 percent before 2015.

Since 2002, our tertiary education centres, the University of the West Indies (UWI), the Trinidad and Tobago Hospitality and Tourism Institute (THTI), the College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTAATT) and the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) have together educated over 121,730 persons. In addition Mr. Speaker, with the support of Government, private institutions have significantly increased their enrolment. For example, the University of the Southern Caribbean, increased student enrolment from 757 in 2001 to 3,800 in 2008.

University of Trinidad and Tobago

Mr. Speaker, in only a few short years, the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) has been a phenomenal success in meeting and surpassing its initial mandate. The Government will consolidate and expand the activities of the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) to complement the programmes offered by the University of the West Indies and will place emphasis, largely, on meeting the specific needs of the national economy to take it forward in the shortest time possible to Vision 2020 .

In the 2008-2009 academic year, the University of Trinidad and Tobago will expand its course offerings to include programmes in security systems, theatre arts, fashion design and management, criminology as well as a series of professional engineering programmes. The UTT is responding to the need for more skilled persons in the food production sector by introducing Bachelor of Science degrees in Animal Science, Plant Science, Biotechnology and Food Technology at its Centre for Bio-sciences, Agriculture and Food Technology.

Mr. Speaker 7,000 plus students applied for admission to the UTT in the last academic year, and 5,000 were accommodated. To meet the growing demand of applicants, the Government will continue construction work on UTT's Main Campus and the development plans for the Chaguaramas, Pt. Lisas and Centeno Campuses. Upgrades will be made to several other facilities coming under the purview of the University. This initiative has had the effect of realising tremendous efficiencies in streamlining the administration and operations of these institutions and effecting delivery in a more cost effective manner.

The UTT Tobago Regional Knowledge Hub is another important project that will be undertaken in the coming fiscal year, as is the establishment of a UTT presence in Pt. Fortin as part of its collaboration with Atlantic LNG.

National Training Agency (NTA)

Mr Speaker, Vision 2020 speaks to a skilled workforce. Recognising that there are young people who may not have the requisite qualification or skills and experience to obtain a job, a number of training programmes have been introduced.

Mr. Speaker through these programmes, over 70,000 persons have been equipped with skills and have obtained work experience since 2002. During the next fiscal year, the Government intends to rationalize these programmes and establish more direct links with the business community. In order to support this effort, Cabinet has approved the establishment by the National Training Agency (NTA) of a National Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Registry.

Mr. Speaker, the Government is proud to report that the National Training Agency (NTA) is successfully carrying out its mandate to co-ordinate and regulate technical and vocational

education and training, thereby promoting and facilitating coherence and quality in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Our labour market faces supply shortages in several areas as the demands of an expanding economy make themselves felt. To facilitate the need for information on available jobs, training needs for industry, and lists of persons trained in particular professions the National Training Agency will be developing a comprehensive registry of information on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Programmes, Providers, Graduates and vacancies. The National Training Agency will further promote efficiency in the labour market by implementing a system to register and accredit all training providers.

In addition, Mr. Speaker the National Training Agency is establishing strategic partnerships with the business community. It recently hosted a National Career and Recruitment Fairs in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Commerce both in Trinidad and in Tobago. The National Training Agency is preparing workforce development plans in collaboration with industry.

All of this Mr. Speaker, speaks to the approach of this Government to realign the delivery in this sector, to realize efficiencies and more effective delivery as we develop our people and provide the skills-training, consistent with workforce demands thus ensuring relevance of the training provided to the various sectors.

HEALTH

Mr. Speaker, the Government is undertaking a fundamental shift in policy in the Health Sector. In this context, a comprehensive health care system places greater emphasis on preventive services that could potentially prevent illness or reduce the burden of disease rather than on care services after an illness occurs. The Government will continue to partner with our people on the road to better health with programmes to foster healthy lifestyle choices that reduce propensity to preventable illnesses such as lung cancer, HIV AIDS, diabetes, heart disease etc. Healthy lifestyle choices and early screening initiatives will in the medium and long term reduce the numbers of our population who need to seek health care at our nation's medical institutions. Mr. Speaker, we as citizens must take responsibility for our overall health and wellness.

Mr. Speaker, the Government's vision for the Health sector is one in which all our citizens are empowered to live long, healthy, and productive lives. Our focus will be the provision of first class primary health care and health infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker over the last fiscal year, the Government also commenced a comprehensive overview of the processes involved in the Health Sector. The aim is to improve the operational capability of the sector and to sustain improvements in the quality of health care. Mr. Speaker, this is critical to the attainment of the three strategic objectives that have been identified for the Health sector:

- i. fostering a healthy and productive population;
- ii. creating and maintaining a world class health care delivery system and
- iii. developing and managing a comprehensive population-based public health system.

The Government in conjunction with the private sector has developed a series of programmes to promote healthy living that include Wellness Centres, Healthy Spaces, Social Communication, Health fairs, the Celebration of Health Promotion month and others.

Mobile clinics have been pivotal to providing primary health care services such as glucose testing for diabetic patients; screening for hypertension, obesity, cholesterol and dietary disorders; vision screening; as well as to promoting home, school and community group visits to encourage wellness and healthy lifestyles for persons in remote areas.

Mr. Speaker, a Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases Technical Advisory Committee has been established comprising members from various sectors of the population to create a more efficient and effective system of delivery. This Committee will assist the Government in rationalizing and strengthening the coordination between the range of initiatives and programmes developed over the years to deal with issues of prevention, treatment and control of chronic non-communicable diseases in Trinidad and Tobago.

Chronic Disease Assistance Programme (CDAP)

Mr. Speaker, from June 2008, the Chronic Disease Assistance Programme (CDAP) was further expanded to provide free blood glucose testing machines and strips to insulin dependant diabetics. In addition, all aspects of CDAP have been expanded and computerized. A comprehensive evaluation of CDAP will be conducted in the new fiscal year to improve the overall efficiency and efficacy of the programme as well as to develop a long term strategy for its expansion.

Trinidad and Tobago Health Sciences Initiative (TTHSI)

The Government has partnered with John Hopkins Medicine International and the University of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, under the Trinidad and Tobago Health Sciences Initiative (TTHSI) the Government will focus on education and training systems that can increase the capabilities of local and regional resources. The Trinidad and Tobago Health Sciences Initiative will also develop biomedical facilities for training, education, governance, oversight and delivery of research and medical programmes for disease screening, prevention and treatment. The Initiative will provide facilities for training, education, governance, oversight and research.

Communicable Diseases HIV/AIDS

Mr. Speaker, the Health Sector's Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS has two overarching goals: firstly to reduce the incidence of HIV infections and secondly to mitigate the negative impact of HIV/AIDS on persons infected and affected. The Government's collaboration with other key stakeholders in the fight against HIV/AIDS has yielded significant results. Between 2002 and 2007 there has been a more than 65 percent decline in the number of AIDS cases and greater than 50 percent decline in the mortality rate with respect to AIDS related deaths. Through collaboration with the Medical Research Foundation, over 4,000 patients have been treated by a multidisciplinary team to date.

The Government is now implementing a clinical management system, electronic health records and laboratory information systems for HIV/AIDS. The Project will be completed this year and will include the integration of systems and the training of personnel.

National Health Infrastructure Plan

Mr. Speaker, the Government is in the process of reviewing and assessing the current and future demand for health services infrastructure so that our health care delivery system will

be able to meet the needs of our citizens. The move to first class primary health care is being facilitated through a major health infrastructure development and upgrade program.

Since 2002, the Government has launched several initiatives to expand and upgrade the country's primary health care facilities and hospitals. To this end health centres were built in San Juan, Petit Valley, Debe, La Romaine and Barataria. The St. James District Health Facility is now under construction, and the Morvant and St. Madeline Health Centres and the St. Joseph Enhanced Health Facility will be completed in 2009. The Upper Laventille and Carenage Health Centres are in the land acquisition phase.

Mr. Speaker, work will commence in 2009 at a number of health facilities including the construction of the Chaguanas District Health Facility, the Diego Martin District Health Facility; the Sangre Grande Enhanced Health Facility, and the Arima Hospital. These construction projects will be supported by the upgrade and refurbishment works at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex; the Port of Spain General Hospital; the San Fernando General Hospital; the National Radiotherapy Centre; the Chemistry Food and Drug building; and the Medical Library.

Mr. Speaker, the design of the Port of Spain General Hospital replacement facility is complete and a site has been identified for the Central Trinidad Hospital facility. Despite earlier challenges, construction work on the Point Fortin and Scarborough Hospitals are due to commence later this year.

The Government has begun the procurement process for the services of a contractor for the National Oncology Centre and construction is scheduled to recommence in 2009. The functional programme for National Public Health Laboratory has been completed, a site has been identified for the project and construction is expected to commence in 2009.

Renal Dialysis Centres

Mr. Speaker, over the last four years we have increased the number of dialysis machines at the public health institutions from 21 to 36. In addition, we intend to increase the complement of dialysis machines at the Port of Spain General Hospital from 4 to 24 within the next three years. Two Renal Dialysis Centres have been earmarked for the North Central Regional Health Authority. Each of the Centres will treat approximately 200 patients per week. The completion of the Dialysis Centres is scheduled for October 2009.

In order to increase access to dialysis treatment in the short term, we have formalized partnership agreements with the John Hayes Memorial Foundation, the MajTerrence Dialysis Centre, the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital and other private health institutions. Some 577 patients are now being dialysed, an increase of 32 percent over the last year. Since January 2006, the National Organ Transplant Unit (NOTU) has been providing urgent life saving renal dialysis to patients and to date, the Unit has facilitated kidney transplants for 39 persons.

National Health System

Mr. Speaker, the Government's medium to long term goal is the establishment of a National Health System. Under the National Health System the state will maintain financial responsibility for the provision of an essential basket of services. Ultimately every citizen will be able to exercise choice of provider. In other words, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago will be entitled to access a range of services at both public and private health institutions based on an agreed formula. The policy framework to guide the operations of the National Health System is now being developed, and the costing of health services as well as the design of the benefit package is due for completion in the coming fiscal year.

HOUSING

Mr. Speaker, as the Government progresses on its path to developed nation status, one of the important building blocks of a caring society is the provision of housing, especially for those for whom the acquisition of a house is a challenge. Since 2002 to date the Government has initiated more than 32,000 housing starts, well in line with our projected 2020 goal of 8,000 housing starts per year for ten years in the Public Sector.

The underlying philosophy of the Government's Housing Policy is to create integrated and wholesome communities through the provision of acceptable and affordable housing solutions. The Government's Housing Policy will continue to focus on the provision of low income housing to persons unable to access houses from the private sector. In addition, after satisfying the commitments to Caroni workers and other farming needs on arable lands, the Government will make a portion of those lands not suitable for agriculture, available to those persons who wish to construct their own homes.

Mr. Speaker, the Government has made several financing options available to prospective homeowners under its programme. These include the Rent-to-Own Programme which gives persons unable to service a mortgage immediately, the facility to rent a housing unit from the Housing Development Corporation for a period of five years, with the option to purchase, with the balance going towards the purchase.

Mr. Speaker, the Approved Mortgage Companies Programme provides preferential mortgage rates to first time purchasers whose houses cost up to a maximum of \$450,000.00. These mortgages are provided by registered mortgage companies. In the coming fiscal year, the Government will amend the legal framework governing the Approved Mortgages Programme to incorporate the concepts of portability and transferability of mortgages to allow for survivors of the mortgage holder to take over the mortgage following his or her death.

Another mechanism through which the Government will make housing units more affordable for the targeted low-income group is the provision of subsidies under the National Settlements Programme. This Subsidy Programme has two components which are aimed at encouraging persons to access their own homes privately, either through purchasing houses or constructing their homes on their own land. In the next fiscal year, both the Beneficiary Owned Land Subsidy and the subsidies under the National Settlements Programme will be

reviewed and revised with the intent of making them more reflective of the recent changes in construction costs and income levels

Mr. Speaker, in an effort to maintain the existing housing stock the Housing Policy also provides Home Improvement Grants and the Home Improvement Subsidies, which assist persons in undertaking repairs and making improvements to their homes. Home owners with a maximum household income of \$60,000 per annum and who also meet all the criteria are eligible for a grant of \$15,000 to effect home improvements and repairs. The Home Improvement Subsidy is provided to beneficiaries with a household income of less than \$84,000 per annum. The maximum value of the subsidy is \$20,000 subject to the beneficiary providing matching resources in a combination of funds, materials, and labour.

Mr. Speaker, the Housing Allocation Policy is currently under review in order to address issues such as salary ceiling, date of application, number of dependants, and age of dependants. The database has been re-organized to capture eligible applicants only, and to have a seamless processing from application to allocation, thus bringing an added measure of efficiency to the process.

The next stage of intervention in the Housing Sector is a proposal for the introduction of a reverse mortgage system which the Government will begin reviewing in the new fiscal year.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to outline this Government's strategy for the social sector.

This Government is committed to working with the private sector, non-governmental organisations and community groups in promoting the common good, developing a nurturing society, fostering social awareness among all citizens, improving our people's standard of living, in short, and shaping our future together. We are our brother's keeper and we must ensure that all our citizens are able to live in keeping with their dignity as human beings.

Poverty Reduction

Mr. Speaker, data from the 2005 Survey of Living Conditions estimated that 16.7 percent of the population was poor, a reduction from the previous figure of 34 percent in 1992. It should be noted however that the survey does not factor in the substantial number of non cash benefits offered by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, the Government will enhance its poverty reduction strategy inter alia:

- through the Social Welfare Grants;
- by increasing the levels of cash transfer of the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme through the new TT Card System;

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, the Government will increase the levels of cash transfers by approximately 35 percent as follows:

Household Size	Current Level	Increased Level
Families of 3 members and under	\$300.00	\$410.00
Families of 4 to 5 members	\$400.00	\$550.00
Families with 6 or more members	\$500.00	\$700.00

This Programme will benefit from the support of retailers who are expected to provide a discount on each item purchased in a similar fashion as is now done with the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Retired Persons (TTARP) Card. The First Citizens Bank is also supporting this programme by waiving the transaction fee for each purchase. The Government will improve the efficiency of this programme by updating the registry of beneficiaries. Furthermore, each beneficiary's situation will be reviewed every two years to determine the participant's continued eligibility for this benefit. Beneficiaries will also be given assistance through the Family Intervention Network, which will provide training and job opportunities to assist individuals to become more independent and move away from the programme.

Mr. Speaker, the Government will also continue to partner with international agencies such as the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme in executing a more cohesive and aggressive approach to poverty reduction.

Decentralisation of the Delivery of Social Services

Mr. Speaker, the Government has developed an efficiency framework and implementation plan for the phased rollout of the Decentralised delivery of social services. The key underlying concepts of the Decentralisation model are: better diagnostic arrangements, improved client focus and, in particular, a much more proactive approach to service delivery which involves partnering with the private sector. We will bring Social Services geographically closer to clients and this will encourage increased interaction between social workers and members of the communities. The new system will eliminate the overlaps and clarify responsibilities within the existing system. Essentially therefore, the establishment of a Social Services Delivery Agency (SSDA) will serve to centralise the delivery of all social services under the Ministry of Social Development and in so doing, facilitate reporting and monitoring arrangements in accordance with best practices.

The Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and private sector agencies are also major factors in the Decentralisation programme which will be implemented in two phases commencing in October 2008 and lasting an estimated period of 39 months.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Mr. Speaker, the approach of the Government toward security and crime fighting is a cross-sectoral public/private and community based approach. On the crime front a new Acting Commissioner of Police has been appointed and we are seeing moderate improvement in crime control. The Government is committed to improving the criminal justice system through measures to improve the performance of the police and prison system.

Mr. Speaker, during the current fiscal year, the Special Anti Crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago (SAUTT), which is now in its fifth year of operation, focused on three main areas - strengthening national forensic capability, providing developmental training for law enforcement and lending operational support to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and other law enforcement agencies. Training programmes at the Specialist Crime Academy of SAUTT, were successfully concluded, producing graduates in the fields of forensic

awareness, crime scene management and investigative techniques. Local law enforcement personnel are now being mentored by experienced SAUTT personnel. This is being complemented by executive and supervisory training of members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service at facilities in the United States and United Kingdom. Mr Speaker is becoming a world-class organisation.

The Unit also upgraded its operational infrastructure with the completion of a number of purpose-built facilities including a facility for proper storage of forensic items and the conduct of Crime Scene Investigations Analysis, a Forensics Armoury and Fingerprints Centre, a Multi Purpose Building and SAUTT's Security Studies Institute (SSI) Academy. For this fiscal year, SAUTT provided training for more than 2,070 law enforcement personnel.

In this context, the training of local specialist personnel engaged in investigative, analytical and forensic work commenced in 2008. This training will continue in 2009 and will complement other capacity building measures such as data warehousing. The ultimate goal of this project will be to generate the successful e-tracing of illegal firearms interdicted by our security forces. This will increase detection rates for the illicit possession and use of firearms and identify routes and persons of interest involved in this nefarious chain of criminal activity within Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker the drug trade is largely responsible for the crime situation in Trinidad and Tobago and our full attention is directed to this area. In view of this, a further boost to the monitoring of cross border movement of illicit commodities was the installation of the National Drug Control System (NDS) this year. This facility can trace the movement, nationally and internationally, of precursor chemicals, and serve as a main platform within the Caribbean Basin to minimize any risk of illegal diversion. The delivery of three Offshore Patrol Vessels, six fast patrol boats, four armed helicopters and six interceptors, by 2010, will further bolster the protection of Trinidad and Tobago's territorial waters from the illegal drug trade. This will complement the capabilities of the already commissioned Coastal Radar Centre.

Mr. Speaker, the proceeds of crime continue to exact a debilitating effect on this country's financial framework. The Government has a National Policy to Develop, Monitor and Promote a Counter Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Framework and shall bring to this Honourable House before the end of 2008 enabling legislation to prevent the flow of illicitly derived proceeds from organized criminal activity.

Policing for People

Mr. Speaker, as part of a comprehensive strategy to strengthen the relationship between the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, the Police Service embarked upon a new approach to policing in the context of its newly adopted service orientation.

This approach, called "Policing for People", will assist in the war against crime by improving work habits, morale and quality of service and enhance public perception and interaction with the Police. It is also aimed at reducing crime as well as providing an enhanced crime solving capability. It is anticipated that this initiative will improve the quality of policing services, culminating in safer communities and a safer Trinidad and Tobago.

The initiative "Policing for People" was piloted in April 2007 at five Model Police Stations: Arouca, Chaguanas, Morvant, West End and San Fernando. Over the next two years, five

additional Police Stations at Belmont, Marabella, Point Fortin, Mayaro and Crown Point will be included in the initiative.

An essential component for the success of the initiative is adequate training. In this context, over 450 officers have been trained in community policing, capable of responding quickly to calls in emergencies, and conducting preliminary investigations.

Mr. Speaker, the Model Stations Initiative is already showing signs of success. Between the first quarter of 2007 and the first quarter of 2008, all model stations registered a decline in crime ranging from 21 percent to 35 percent.

It is anticipated that, as a result, the public will, over time, increase their trust and willingness to work with the police, to treat more effectively with crime. In addition, the Community Watch Programme, will complement the "Policing for people programme" thereby reducing the demand for police resources and involves citizens in their own security.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Reform of the Pension System

Mr. Speaker, having outlined its policy for the reform of the pension arrangements in the White Paper on the Reform of the Financial Sector, the Government has been assiduously working on completing the tasks outlined in that document. The overall objective of the reform is to modernize the pension industry by adopting international best practice and developing and implementing a comprehensive pension regime for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. This will include consolidation and modernization of the various pieces of dated legislation and integrated regulation and supervision of the industry. The reform of the Pension System is a key component in shaping the future of our working population.

Mr Speaker, two years ago the Government engaged a leading firm of consultants to undertake an extensive review of the pension arrangements for monthly paid public service employees and retirees. This review is now completed and based on the recommendations submitted by the consultants the Government is considering these recommendations with a view to implementation during 2009.

The two main purposes of the review were to:

- assess the current pension plans against the needs and constraints of the various stakeholders including current public servants, retired public servants and taxpayers; and
- to modernize the plans to conform to international best practices and trends.

As a result of this review, the Government intends to engage in extensive consultations with the major stakeholders during this exercise.

Mr. Speaker, I want to emphasise that the adoption of any new design to the pension system is subject to consensus from the relevant unions and passage of the required legislation.

Mr. Speaker, in keeping with our policy of keeping people at the centre of all our decision

making I will now outline some of the highlights of the recommendations which we will be actively considering.

- i. Benefits will be paid to survivors, spouse and/or eligible children, of both male and female public servants, and the level of spousal survivor benefits will be improved. The current Widows & Orphans Act will be eliminated in conjunction with this change.
- ii. Improved pension portability for employees who leave the public service, or transfer within the public service. It will allow for employees to transfer the value of their pension entitlement to a personal pension arrangement or to the pension plan of their new employer if they leave the Government.
- iii. Pension benefits will be fully vested after 2 years instead of 5 years.
- iv. Elimination of the limit on pension accruals which presently is 33 1/3 years. This will allow long service public servants to continue to accrue a pension throughout their service with the Government.
- v. Two other changes are being introduced to bring the current pension arrangements in line with international best practice. First, the benefits under the pension arrangements will be determined based on the average of earnings over a 3 year period rather than the final year earnings. Second, the factor used to calculate the amount of the lump sum that retirees receive if they choose to commute 25 percent of their pension will be determined based on actuarially appropriate factors rather than a fixed factor.
- vi. Introduction of employee contributions: Government is considering the introduction of employee contributions for members of the public service, 4 percent on average, as part of the changes to the pension arrangements. The purpose of these contributions is to encourage a culture of savings in Trinidad and Tobago. The Government proposes to increase the salary of public service employees by the amount of any new or increased contribution requirements.

Mr. Speaker, the Government's liability in respect of the current pension arrangements had previously been determined to be between \$21 billion and \$30 billion as at January 1, 2007. We believe therefore that it has become necessary to address this situation expeditiously in a manner that is both beneficial and sustainable. We plan to complete our consultations before the end of the first quarter of fiscal 2009 with a view to implementation by 2010.

Depositary Receipts

Mr. Speaker, in order to further enhance national savings and promote the effective development of the financial sector, especially in the light of recent international developments, it is necessary to broaden the range of domestic investment vehicles. In this context, the Government proposes to introduce a new class of securities, called Trinidad and Tobago Depositary Receipts (TTDRs).

TTDRs are local securities to be traded on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange and represent the security of a foreign company that is traded on an international stock exchange and regulated in an approved foreign jurisdiction.

Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago investors have demonstrated a growing interest in global portfolio diversification. However, a number of challenges including undependable settlements, costly currency conversions, unreliable custody services, poor information flows, unfamiliar market practices and a plethora of tax conventions pose a substantial disincentive to investors seeking to venture outside the Trinidad and Tobago market. In

these circumstances TTDRs will provide a number of benefits to investors who have an interest in investing internationally.

These benefits include:

- Portfolio diversification into international markets;
- Denomination in and payment of dividends in TT dollars, thus eliminating the need for currency conversions by TTDR holders;
- Elimination of International brokerage, international transaction and custodial costs eliminated since TTDRs would be traded locally;
- TTDRs allow institutions with foreign investment restrictions to diversify their investment portfolio composition;
- TTDRs will be as liquid as the underlying foreign share; and
- Nationals would be allowed to acquire/participate in some ownership of multinational companies operating locally if they are part of TTDR programmes.

The Government is of the view that the introduction of Depository Receipts as an additional security available on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange (TTSE) will build on recent initiatives to enhance efficiency and will serve to deepen the TTSE by expanding the range of securities available for trading on the Exchange. The introduction of a TTDR regime will also positively impact Government's ongoing initiative to develop the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre by increasing local trading and trading-related financial services.

The introduction of Depository Receipts as a tradeable security on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange (TTSE) means greater integration with global capital markets. We will therefore apply the strictest eligibility criteria to ensure that only the best rated companies are considered. In addition the Stock Exchange will need to establish the necessary regulatory practices for effective oversight. The legislation to give effect to the establishment of the TTDRs will be brought to Parliament before the end of the year.

Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority

Mr. Speaker, the establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority (TTRA) involves the merger of the Inland Revenue Division and the Customs and Excise Division which together account for the collection of 95 percent of Government's revenue. This initiative epitomises this Government's commitment to changing the way this country does business. The move to this model for our revenue collections will bring the efficiency gains necessary in any modern revenue administration.

The Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority (TTRA) will set new performance standards for service delivery in areas of tax and customs administration. The setting-up of the Authority will provide for the greater flexibility to adopt performance-based management practices.

The upgrade to the IT Infrastructure will also mean an enhanced service to you the general public in terms of much faster response, more timely information as this will be done on a real-time basis.

The integration of the IT components of both Inland Revenue Department and Customs is being pursued to accommodate electronic delivery services such as the filing of tax returns and the processing of cargo manifest documents electronically.

The Revenue Authority model is one that has been adopted by over 40 countries worldwide and therefore Trinidad and Tobago has the opportunity to benefit from the lessons learned from these experiences.

Mr. Speaker the buildings designated to house the TTRA are almost completed; the enabling legislation to give effect to the Authority will be laid in Parliament early in 2009. We are undertaking an extensive communication strategy with staff at all levels and we have engaged all the relevant unions in the decision making process. With all parties working together we have developed an organizational structure for the authority which embraces modern human resource practices and procedures.

Mr. Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority (TTRA) will serve as a catalyst for the continuous process of improving performance in revenue collection. The Authority will have a corporate character and its governance structure is designed to facilitate more efficient decision-making and greater effectiveness. It will be constituted as a Statutory Body managed by a board of directors, which will have responsibility for establishing policies and systems relating to resource management, finance and procurement. In addition, specific measures will be retained to ensure accountability since the Authority will be governed by the Exchequer and Audit Act.

The Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority will be governed by a structure and systems which will be geared to operate in a competitive global environment. Greater emphasis will be placed on areas such as Trade Facilitation, International Tax Law, International Customs Law and Border Protection. This means that there will be a need for staff with a greater mix of skills, vast experience and sound integrity capable of championing the mandate of the new organization.

The process leading to the establishment of the Revenue Authority has included leadership and change management sessions with staff involved in the transition. A tripartite approach has been adopted and employees' representatives and members of private sector interest groups have been involved in consultations with the Government. This level of collaboration augurs well for the future solidifying our revenue base and securing our revenue for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, we fully appreciate that a Revenue Authority is not a goal in itself. The whole philosophy behind the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority is to create conditions and establish a platform that allows reform and modernization to proceed more quickly and effectively. The real goal for the Authority is to modernize the country's revenue collection administration as an overall pillar of institutional reform as we pursue Vision 2020.

Legislation to give effect to the establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority will be brought to Parliament this year and it is expected that the new organization will be in operation by the third quarter of 2009.

Reform of the Property Tax Regime

Mr. Speaker, the Government is committed to making the tax administration system as efficient and user-friendly as possible. Part of the tax reform initiative is the reform of our property tax regime which is antiquated, inefficient and lacking in equity. To date a project office has been operationalised and it is expected that the preferred consultant will begin work in October 2008.

In the coming fiscal year, the consultants will engage in the preparation of a modern system of assessment of property values and collection of property taxes throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Property valuations and assessment will be streamlined through a single assessment agency – the Valuation Division of the Ministry of Finance. Tax collection will also be streamlined through a single collection agency - the Board of Inland Revenue. This new system will be fair and equitable, transparent, user friendly, and easy to administer. It will use modern technology and be inter-operable with other national systems. The system will be able to reflect property usage and be integrated with digital mapping and real estate operations.

The new property tax assessment and collection system will ensure that all taxable properties are registered and valued for taxation at today's market prices. The system will use the international best practices in property valuation and will include an efficient methodology to address objections and appeals. Customer service at the District Revenue Offices will be greatly enhanced as information technology will be employed to streamline records and facilitate the payment processes.

Access to records and payment of taxes will also be available online. Enabling legislation in the form of a new Property Tax Act will be forthcoming in the new fiscal year. The proposed new Property Tax regime will take effect from January 1, 2010.

Local Government Reform

Mr. Speaker, the Government's vision of Local Government is to develop "sustainable local communities rooted in the principles of robust participative democracy embracing all." In this context our Local Government Reform Programme will embrace all aspects of community life and benefit all citizens irrespective of race, ethnicity, income level, gender, class, religion and social standing. In other words Mr. Speaker, all coming together to shape our future.

Mr. Speaker, the Local Government transformation and modernization programme is an essential component of Vision 2020. The main objectives of the Programme are:

- i. to modernize and rationalize the Local Government structure and organizational systems in order to improve operational efficiency and the quality of local decision-making;
- ii. to improve the managerial efficiency and effectiveness of the Ministry of Local Government and Municipal Corporations;
- iii. to improve the quality of physical infrastructure, access to basic amenities and the delivery of quality goods and other services;
- iv. to enhance the coordination of service delivery, the mobilization of community resources and efficacy of Regional Planning through the review of Local Government Boundaries to ensure that they are consistent with Central Administrative Districts; and
- v. to enhance local participative democracy through mechanisms for embracing the participation and involvement of all our citizens in Local Government Affairs.

Having taken into account the dynamic global environment and changing political, economic and social realities of Trinidad and Tobago, we have to design a suitable Local Government model consistent with such realities as we transform and modernize its structure, organization and system.

Our Local Government reform embraces a new model of efficiency which will guarantee a higher level of delivery to our citizenry. We believe that the proposals will benefit the public in a multiplicity of ways including:

- More effective management of resources;
- Expanded quality service delivery coverage;
- Improved physical infrastructure;
- Healthier and more sanitary communities;
- Safe, secure, peaceful, resilient communities;
- Community entrepreneurship, employment generation and
- Increased opportunity for community decision-making.

Public consultations on the Green Paper Local Government Reform are in progress in the 14 municipalities. Approximately 3,000 persons have attended these consultations representing more than 50 national and community groups, organizations and institutions. These public consultations are expected to be completed shortly and we expect to take a Draft Bill on Local Government Reform to Parliament early in the new fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, the Government will ensure that the Local Government system in Trinidad and Tobago is modernized and transformed in such a manner that will not only encourage the widespread participation and involvement of all citizens in the community, but also play a significant role in the development of such communities. Local government bodies will not only be an equal partner in the development process but also contribute immensely to enhancing the quality of life and the standard of living of all citizens.

Gambling

Mr. Speaker, this Honourable House and the national community will recall that last year the casino gambling industry was given a moratorium of five years to prepare for its imminent closure. This moratorium will not be extended. In addition, the Government has mandated the NLCB to review its operations with the specific aim of eliminating all its games of chance within the short term.

In this context Mr. Speaker, we propose to give a restructured National Lotteries Control Board a new mandate to use its wide network to process a wide range of government transactions. This will increase efficiency and decentralize many of the transactions involving an interface between government agencies and its public.

The NLCB with its many outlets nationwide can, for example, accommodate the sale of Bus and Ferry tickets as well as tickets for the soon to be introduced Water Taxi service. This service can contribute to less time spent on the nation's roads by people who generally commute to effect these and other transactions.

The NLCB will streamline its operations and improving the quality of its staff to meet its expanded mandate. In addition the NLCB has also been tasked with developing a tight regulatory framework that will reduce the negative societal impact that an unregulated casino gambling industry is having on certain segments of the population. Simultaneously, care will be taken to ensure the easy transition of staff from the gambling industry into other sectors of the economy through retraining programmes.

International best practice shall be used by the NLCB to develop a regulatory and legal framework under which all gaming agencies shall operate during the moratorium. In this process the NLCB shall continue to advise all stakeholders about the regulation of the

gaming industry and about the expansion of its mandate to new commercial services. The new NLCB legislation will be laid in Parliament during the first quarter of the fiscal year.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURE

Mr. Speaker, our communities are the cradles in which our people are born, grow, develop, mature and contribute to nation-building and spend the last years of their lives. Our Vision 2020 recognises that a caring society has strong and sustainable communities as its foundation.

In the coming fiscal year, the Government will focus on the institutional strengthening of our Village and Community Councils that have undertaken several pro-community projects over the years. We shall also be restructuring and upgrading one hundred and ten community centres to support local and community programmes to meet the needs of the elderly and physically challenged as well as; develop and preserve the nation's indigenous art forms. Mr. Speaker, this approach highlights the philosophy of this government to work and collaborate with our people in shaping the future in all facets of our lives.

Through the National Commission for Self Help the Government in the last fiscal year partnered with community groups to undertake 975 separate self-help repair and reconstruction projects. Similarly the initiatives carried out under the Community Development Fund have been important in the fight against poverty. In the last fiscal year 17 pro-community organisations received project funding for poverty alleviation which benefited approximately seventeen thousand persons. These and the many other poverty alleviation projects, will be strengthened in the coming year.

The Prime Minister's Best Village Trophy programme has a long history of preserving and promoting our intangible heritage and contributing to social harmony. In the last fiscal year 3,840 persons from 96 communities benefited from training in the performing arts. These initiatives involve many of our vulnerable youth, thus engaging them in positive personal and nation building activities.

Mr Speaker, following years of extensive research we have developed the G Pan which is used as an integral part of the National Steel Symphony Orchestra which received rave reviews at the recent CARIFESTA in Guyana. Following on this we have established a dance band, Divine Echoes, to reintroduce young people to the dance option as a form of recreation. During the course of next year we will establish the national philharmonic orchestra, which will be an 82 piece traditional philharmonic group while plans are also underway for the setting up of the National Theatre Company.

The 2008 Carnival was a success with the transition from the "big stage" of the Queen's Park Savannah to "Mas on the Move" on the streets of Port of Spain. Artistes, masqueraders, vendors all benefited from the improved arrangements for 2008 in Port of Spain, and Skinner Park. The Government will continue to work with the many stakeholders involved with our national Carnival to make Carnival 2009 the greatest show on earth.

SPORT AND YOUTH

Sport

Mr. Speaker, the Government's initiatives in Sport and Youth development will continue to be guided by the National Sport Policy and National Youth Policy which have emerged out of the 2020 Strategic Plan.

The Government acknowledges that there were too many inefficiencies in the Sport sector in Trinidad and Tobago. As a result, the new Board of the Sport Company of Trinidad and Tobago has been mandated to take the sector's development to a higher level. The development of sporting disciplines is largely the domain of the National Sporting Organizations (NSOs) with the Government playing a facilitative and supporting role. To this end the Government has been providing financial and technical support to our National Sporting Organisations. The effectiveness of this support was already measurable at the Beijing Olympics where our athletes excelled especially in the track and field events.

In the last four years, we have also had outstanding performances and success at regional and international competitions in football, swimming, golf, volleyball, and cricket. These were not just by chance but as a result of a deliberate strategy where all stakeholders, athlete, coach, administrator, and Government, worked together to realise the objective.

The Government will pursue a more holistic framework for the development of sport through the promotion of physical education at the primary school level; and the provision of opportunities for sustainable participation from this level through secondary school to international competition. Recent collaborative efforts among key stakeholders have generated a Task Force which has been mandated to devise a framework for the development of a pathway for sport from the primary level to the elite level.

Mr. Speaker, in 2009 the Government will continue to increase the opportunities for recreation and for attaining excellence in sport by expanding and upgrading the sport plant. This will involve the commencement, continuation or completion of upgrade work at a total of 42 public recreational grounds throughout the country. Other significant upgrading and restoration work will be undertaken on our flagship facilities at the Jean Pierre Sports Complex and the Hasely Crawford Stadium consequent on Trinidad and Tobago's in time for the hosting of the inaugural 2009 Caribbean Games in July next year.

Mr. Speaker, when an athlete competes and excels in an international or regional forum, it not only brings personal glory to that individual but it also fosters national pride and societal cohesiveness and gives inspiration and encouragement for others to aspire to similar standards of excellence. From this perspective, the Government will continue to assist and support those citizens who have demonstrated the potential for participating in and excelling at regional and international competitions.

Consistent with the Policy for Financial Assistance to High Performance Athletes, the Government will continue to provide funding to elite athletes, on the recommendation of the Trinidad and Tobago Olympic Committee. In addition, Policy Guidelines for the Grant of Financial Assistance to High Performance Athletes have been adopted and these Guidelines will detail conditions under which elite athletes may be supported in their preparation for and participation at various international competitions.

Youth

Mr. Speaker, the Government is determined that young people should become fully involved in planning and shaping their future. Successful youth mainstreaming in national policy planning will provide opportunities for our youth to participate and contribute their vision, on behalf of their peers, from the programme and project design stage to the implementation and evaluation stages.

The National Youth Policy advocates for young people to be empowered to make informed choices in life. The concept of youth empowerment involves two main pivots - a major facilitating role by the Government, as well as a role for young people themselves. Empowering young people requires that Government and other main partners create and support enabling conditions under which they can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the behest of others.

Mr. Speaker, in order to ensure the smooth and successful implementation of this policy, Government will target specific Ministries to be the focal points for mainstreaming of youth issues in line with the National Youth Policy. Young people will have the opportunity to participate in the design, planning, execution and evaluation of these Youth Programmes. A formal mandate will be drafted, subsequent to stakeholder workshops, to ensure that the youth are involved in the development of public policies and future programmes which directly impact their lives.

In the new fiscal year, it is envisaged that the National Youth Council (NYCTT) will be the driving force to catapult young people to the forefront of the governance process through nationally coordinated empowerment activities, and the proper representation of youth in the policy formulation process and on policy implementation bodies. The National Youth Council (NYCTT) will play a major role in implementing the projects outlined under the Strategic Implementation Plan of the National Youth Policy.

THE BUDGET ARITHMETIC

Review of Fiscal Operations in Fiscal Year 2008

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to give this Honourable House a brief review of the Central Government operations during the 2008 fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker the last Budget was based on an assumed oil price of US\$50 per barrel. As it turned out the weighted average oil price received during this fiscal year was US\$93.15 per barrel. It is this price differential which has resulted in a level of energy tax collections, which is approximately \$8 billion higher than budgeted.

Mr. Speaker, non-energy tax collections have also exceeded budget projections by \$4.2 billion. The increase reflected the buoyancy of the non-energy sector, the rise in consumer imports which have boosted Value Added Tax (VAT), **by approximately \$ 1 billion more than projected**, the success of the recent tax amnesty which yielded approximately \$553 million in additional revenue, and continued improvement in tax administration. Mr. Speaker, over the past few years, we have been able to appreciate how much tax collections could be enhanced in response to changes in tax administration. This augurs well for the introduction of Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority.

On the expenditure side, Mr. Speaker, excluding amortization and transfers to the two main statutory funds, total central government expenditure amounted to \$42.3 billion. This compared with the original budget figure of \$40.3 billion, plus the supplementary appropriation, approved in May and September of \$3.5 billion and \$3.9 billion respectively.

Mr. Speaker these figures yield an overall surplus of \$7.9Billion. Of this \$4.72 billion has been transferred to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and \$2.33 billion in net transfers to the Infrastructure Development Fund, leaving a net surplus of \$39 million.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to explain to this Honourable House, the main areas where this \$42.3 billion of government expenditure was allocated. With respect to current expenditure:

- Approximately \$7.1 billion or 17.7 percent represented personnel emoluments;
- Pensions and transfers to individuals, amounted to \$4.7 billion
- Subsidies amounted to \$2.4 billion, of which \$2.2 billion represented the fuel subsidy,
- Expenditure on Other Goods and Service amounted to \$5.0 billion,
- Interest Payments were \$2.8 billion,
- Transfers to Education Institutions were \$1.4 billion, and
- Transfers to State Enterprises, Statutory Bodies and Local Government Bodies amounted to \$7.0billion.

Capital expenditure amounted to \$10 billion of which \$4.5 billion was disbursed under the Public Sector Investment Programme and \$5.5 billion under the Infrastructural Development Fund.

Fiscal Operations for 2009

Mr. Speaker, let me turn now to the Budget for 2009.

The Budget this year is calibrated on an assumed oil price of US\$70 per barrel, a gas price of U\$4.00 per mmbtu and a projected GDP growth of 5.6 percent. Based on these assumptions, total revenue is forecast at \$49,465.2 million, comprising energy sector revenue of \$19,924.6 million and non-energy revenue of \$29,540.6 million.

Total Expenditure to be appropriated from the Consolidated Fund is \$44,206.3 million of which \$5,100 million will be transferred to the Infrastructure Development Fund. In addition, we estimate \$6,750.8 million as direct charges on the Consolidated Fund, and \$496 million from the Unemployment Fund and the Green Fund.

Mr. Speaker, the allocation of resources in this year's budget reflect some of the sectoral priorities that I have outlined.

Of the total expenditure:

Education and Training will receive \$ 7,121.6 million
 Infrastructure: \$ 6,594.4 million
 including Works and Transport and Public Utilities
 Health: \$ 4,343.0 million
 National Security \$ 4,731.4 million
 Agriculture: \$ 2,175.3 million
 Housing: \$ 1,627.2 million

To summarize Mr. Speaker:

Total Revenue is estimated to be	\$49,465.2 million
Total Expenditure net of Capital Repayments and Sinking Funds	\$49,445.7 million
For a surplus of	\$19.5 million

Mr. Speaker, I turn now to the specific fiscal measures underpinning this year's budget.

FISCAL MEASURES

Mr. Speaker, over the past several years the growth in our vehicle fleet has been astronomical. The series which once took one year to be completed now takes an average of three to four months. The data shows that from January 1, 2008 to the present, over 30,000 motor vehicles have been registered in Trinidad Tobago. The traffic congestion that our citizens now face on a daily basis throughout the country is having a serious negative effect on productivity, and the stress is leading to road rage and decline in the quality of life. Mr. Speaker the Government has been allocating significant resources to improve our public transportation, which we believe is now reliable and efficient. Against this background Mr. Speaker we propose to increase the Motor Vehicle Tax (MVT) on the importation of Private Motor Vehicles in the following order:

Engine Size	Motor Vehicle Tax per CC Rating
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		Current		Proposed
1599 cc and under	from	0	to	\$5 per cc
1600-1799 cc	from	\$4	to	\$8 per cc
1800-1999 cc	from	\$8	to	\$15 per cc
2000-2499 cc	from	\$21	to	\$25 per cc
2500-2999 cc	from	\$25	to	\$30 per cc
3000-3499 cc	from	\$30	to	\$35 per cc
3500cc and above	from	\$45	to	\$50 per cc

This measure will require amendments to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act and will take effect from September 23, 2008 and will result in increased revenue collections of \$525million.

CNG Conversion

Mr. Speaker the Government is in the process of expanding the distribution of Compressed National Gas (CNG) as we move to a cheaper, economically efficient and environmental friendly fuel system. As a consequence, we propose to remove the Customs Duty and Value added Tax on the Conversion Kits for modifying from Gas to CNG Kits. Mr. Speaker, further to this measure the Government proposes to convert all public service vehicles to CNG usage. The Government will also put measures in place to increase the number of service stations and geographic distribution of these stations offering CNG. This will be achieved over the next two years and begin a progressive move to reduce the fuel subsidy which now amounts to \$2.4 billion.

Increase in the price of Premium Gasoline

Mr. Speaker, the Government proposes to increase the price of premium gasoline from \$3.00 per litre to \$4.00 per litre. This measure will affect the high end of the market and will take immediate effect. The price for other grades of fuel will be retained. We envisage that there would be no increase in the cost of transportation charged by maxi taxis, buses, the majority of taxis and other transport vehicles that use diesel and super unleaded fuel for which the prices have been maintained.

Mr. Speaker, the savings from this measure is estimated at \$200m.

Free Ferry Pass

Mr. Speaker, the Government recognizes the needs of our retired citizens faced by the increased cost of transportation and as a result, we propose to introduce a free "Ferry Pass" to persons 65 years and over for travel between Trinidad and Tobago. This measure will take effect from October 1, 2008 and is estimated to cost \$5million.

Disability Grant

Mr. Speaker, the Disability Grant was increased with effect from 1st October 2007 to \$1,100 and the Government now proposes to increase this amount to \$1,300 at an estimated additional cost of \$40 Million. This measure will take effect from October 1, 2008 and will require amendments to the Public Assistance Act. It will benefit an estimated 17,000 of our citizens.

Public Assistance Grant

Mr. Speaker, to provide relief to the economically challenged in our society we propose to increase the Public Assistance Grants as follows:

	Current Grants	Proposed Grants
1 person households	650	850
2 persons households	900	1100
3 persons households	1,100	1300
4 persons and above households	1,250	1450

This measure is expected to cost an additional \$50.4 Million and will benefit an estimated 21,000 individuals. It will take effect from October 1, 2008.

Senior Citizens Grant

Mr. Speaker with effect from 1st October 2007 the maximum Senior Citizens Grant was increased by \$300 to \$1,650 per month. The Government has reviewed this distribution and made the following adjustments:

- An increase in the income qualifying ceiling from an average monthly income of \$2,500 to \$2,800 per month;
- An increase in the maximum Senior Citizens Grant from \$1,650 to \$1,950 per month;
- An increase in the Senior Citizens Grant for an individual whose monthly income is \$100 or less by \$300 from \$1,650 to \$1,950; and
- An increase in the Senior Citizens Grant for an individual whose monthly income is greater than \$100 but does not exceed \$1,000 by \$300 from \$1,550 to \$1,850.
- Individuals whose average monthly income exceeds \$1,000 will receive a Senior Citizens Grant equal to the difference between the qualifying income ceiling of \$2,800 and the income received. For instance, if an individual is in receipt of an average monthly income of \$1500 his qualifying Senior Citizen Grant will be \$2,800 less \$1,500 equivalent to \$1,300.

The estimated additional cost is \$240 Million and will benefit an estimated 80,000 persons. This measure will take effect from 1st October 2008 and will require amendments to the Senior Citizens' Grant Act.

Retired Public Servants

Mr. Speaker, to provide further inflation protection to fixed income earners the Government proposes to increase the minimum pension payable to retired public servants from \$1,650 to \$1,950. This measure will take effect from October 1, 2008 and is estimated to cost \$70 million and will impact the lives of more than 27,000 of our citizens.

Contributions to Pension/Annuity Plans

Mr. Speaker, in the 2008 fiscal year Government increased the allowance for contributions to pension/annuity plans from \$12,000 to 25,000 to encourage persons employed to increase savings for their retirement. This year we propose to raise the allowance to \$30,000. This will cost an estimated \$25 Million and will require amendments to the Income Tax Act.

Stamp Duty

Mr. Speaker in Fiscal 2007 the Government amended the provisions of the Stamp Duty Act Chap 76:01 which resulted in an increase in the threshold for the qualifying property value subject to Stamp Duty from \$350,000 to \$450,000.00. In light of the continued rise in domestic property values and recognising the Government's objective of making housing affordable for all of our citizens we propose to further increase the qualifying property value to \$850,000. This means that no stamp duty will be payable on the Government's low income housing programme. Properties valued in excess of \$850,000 but less than \$1,250,000 million will attract a stamp duty of three percent. Properties valued in excess of \$1,250,000 million but less than \$1,750,000 will attract a stamp value of 5 percent. Properties valued in excess of \$1,750,000 will attract a stamp value of 7 ½ percent.

This measure is estimated to cost an additional \$30 million and will require amendments to the First schedule of the Stamp Duty Act, Chap 76:01 under the heading "Conveyance or transfer on sale of any Property". It will take effect from October 1, 2008.

Tertiary Education

Mr. Speaker this Administration introduced affordable Tertiary Education to our citizens through the Government Assisted Tertiary Education (GATE) and Higher Education Loan Plan (HELP). Presently the allocation for Post Graduate students at private institutions is fifty (50) percent on an Annual Basis up to a maximum of \$10,000. Since this allocation was made the cost of many programmes of study has increased. Accordingly, we propose to increase this allocation to \$20,000 for Masters Level Programmes and to \$30,000 for Ph. D Level Programmes. This measure is estimated to cost an additional \$40 Million and will take effect from October 1st 2008.

Scholarships for 1st Class Honour Students to PhD level

Mr. Speaker, this Government recognises the critical importance of academic research for the country's development. To encourage our best and brightest to continue their studies and explore new frontiers we propose to grant to Trinidad and Tobago citizens with First Class Honours Degrees scholarships up to the PhD level at any local or foreign institution of their choice.

These Scholarships will be limited initially to students graduating from the University of the West Indies, the University of Trinidad and Tobago, the University of Guyana, the University of the Southern Caribbean and St. George's University in Grenada. However, all current and future Government scholars, including open and additional scholarship winners will be eligible.

These scholarships will be available to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and to citizens who hold dual citizenship from CARICOM member states.

Mr. Speaker it is the Government's intention that these scholarships will be granted on the condition that recipients will return to provide service equivalent to the length of study. The recipient could serve in Trinidad and Tobago or in any other Caribbean country in either the public or private sector.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, the Government will soon be implementing an internship programme, for the duration of two years at all Government ministries and agencies, to employ all recipients of national scholarships.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, on the last occasion when the Budget was presented, the nation was approaching a General Election. The Honourable Prime Minister and Minister of Finance indicated to this Honourable House that the Peoples National Movement would face the judgment of the people with confidence and utmost clarity of conscience.

The people, as expected, gave their verdict of approval on the performance of the Government. They recognized the tremendous progress being made in all spheres of national life and gave us a resounding mandate to continue the transformation of Trinidad and Tobago into a dynamic, developed nation.

This therefore is the foundation of this Budget. Through its measures we will shape the future of our nation together. We will satisfy the wishes of the people for ongoing improvement in the quality of their lives; significantly improve levels of efficiency and productivity in this country; strengthen sustainability in our economic and social development; and enhance national security and stability.

This Budget will further strengthen the fabric and foundation of our society. And it will ensure that we continue as a progressive, prosperous nation, proud of our place in the world.

Mr. Speaker, all plans and programmes in this Budget will be conducted, as is the practice of a Peoples National Movement Government, with the utmost transparency and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, the Government is committed to ensuring that all our citizens have access to all the country can provide. We believe that no one should be excluded because of their economic circumstances. Allow me to illustrate the point with an example. A household may benefit as follows:

- Grandparents or persons over 65 are eligible for the Senior Citizens Grant up to a maximum of \$1,950;
- A minimum public service pension of \$1,950;
- The family may also be eligible for:
 - a Public Assistance Grant of \$1,450;
 - the TTCard for purchases up to a monthly value of \$700 and
 - Free bus and ferry passes are available to those in the family over 65.

Mr. Speaker, the good news for family continues: Our spending allows us to provide:

- a wide range of opportunities for self development, retraining and upward mobility,
- free nursery to tertiary education,
- free access to textbooks and other educational material,
- free meals at all our schools,
- free transport to students to and from schools,
- scholarships for study at tertiary levels,
- first class honours scholars may pursue any course of study, at any cost, anywhere in the world,
- a 2 percent mortgage interest rate to low income earners to purchase a home,
- access to free health care,
- access to free medicine through an expanded C-DAP,
- no Value Added Taxes on all basic food items,
- subsidies on all fuels,

- one of the lowest electricity and water rates in Latin America and the Caribbean
- one of the lowest personal income tax rates anywhere in the world.

Mr. Speaker, I invite all our citizens to continue to work with us as we journey together to attain developed country status: that is Vision 2020. In other words Mr. Speaker, let this be the clarion call for each one of us to play our part in “**Shaping Our Future Together**”.

I thank you Mr. Speaker and may God bless our nation.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move.