

Debate No. 26 of 25.07.06

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**CHILDREN - VIOLENCE & SEXUAL ABUSES -
CASES**

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr N. Bodha) *(By Private Notice)* asked the Minister of Women's Rights, Child Development, Family Welfare & Consumer Protection whether, in regard to the issues of violence against and sexual abuse of children and, in particular, following the alleged cases of rape and murder of A. J. in July 2005 and A. J. A. in June 2006 and the alleged case of torture and murder of A. B. in July 2006, she will state –

- (a) if her Ministry has carried out an inquiry thereinto and the outcome thereof, and
- (b) the measures taken by her Ministry to address the above issues.

The Minister of Women's Rights, Child Development, Family Welfare & Consumer Protection (Mrs I. Seebun): Mr Speaker, Sir, the three cases were referred to the Child Development Unit of my Ministry after the death of the children. As such, the criminal enquiry of death is carried out by the Police. Information received from the Police indicates as follows –

In case of Anita Konsita Jolita

On 03rd July 2005 at 23.15 hrs in the night, Mrs Marie Maria Jolita, aged 19, Mahebourg reported to Mahebourg Police Station that her daughter, Miss Marie Anita Konsita Jolita, aged 2 years was missing.

On 05 July 2005, the corpse of Miss Marie Anita Konsita Jolita was fished out by National Coast Guard Personnel from the sea near Cité La Chaux some 200 metres away in a depth of one foot of water from the shore. A post mortem examination upon the body and attributed the cause of the death to “Exsanguination following perineal injuries”.

Several persons were questioned and two suspects were arrested namely: Master Ludovic Virgino Prodigue, aged 14, residing at Jaynarain Road, Mahebourg and Jean Mervin Roberto Lotoah, aged 19, lorry helper, residing at EDC, Riambel, Surinam. Both of them confessed the charge of

rape and murder. The latter was provisionally charged for “rape” and “murder” whereas the former was charged for “sodomy” and “murder”.

Both accused were examined by Dr. Gaya, Consultant (Psychiatry) at PMOC.

The case was sent to the DPP who advised the holding of a preliminary enquiry before Grand Port Court.

The case was lodged on 07 February 2006. The hearing is scheduled for 02 August 2006.

The next case the “Murder” of – Anne Jenia Arekion of Stanley

On 06 June 2006 at 23.15 hrs in the night, Mrs Aruna Arekion, reported on Monday 05 June 2006 at about 09.10 hours her daughter Annegenia Arekion, aged 4, attending Blanche Neige Pre-Primary School situated at Pigeot Avenue, Rose Hill, by school bus. On the same day at about 13.40 hours in the afternoon, she received a phone call from the said school, informing that her daughter was sick and she was being conveyed to Victoria Hospital. She immediately went to the hospital where she found her daughter unconscious in the Casualty Ward. Subsequently, her daughter was admitted to ICU Ward D 4 by the doctor on duty. Her state of health was serious and she was under artificial respiration.

After medical examination it was found that the child had been sexually assaulted.

On Wednesday 07 June 2006, Anne Jenia Arekion passed away.

After post-mortem examination, the cause of death was due to “Shock following convulsive fits”. It also confirmed sexual assault upon the victim.

The Police has questioned several persons including relatives, neighbours and the school bus driver but no suspect has yet been arrested.

The inquiry is still under way.

The case of Anousha Bannee of Beau Bassin

Mrs Rajinee Munisami, conveyed her daughter Miss Anousha Bannee to Dr. Jeetoo Hospital as she was sick. She was accompanied by her paramour, Stephan Antonello Tossé, 26 years, Video Game Assistant of same address. The child was examined by Dr. Rughoobur, MHO, who certified that the child had already passed away and referred the case to Police for further inquiry. It was found that the child was a battered one who had several injuries all over her body.

On the same day, the Chief Police Medical Officer, performed an autopsy on the corpse and certified that the cause of death was due to “Septicemia following multiple traumatic wounds” and suspected foul play.

An investigation was instantly started by Beau Bassin CID and it is still under way. The mother who confirmed the charge is still in Police custody. The stepfather, Mr Stephan Antonello Tossé was picked up dead at Pailles.

Actions taken by my Ministry on these cases are as follows -

Mr Speaker, Sir, as in the case of Anita Jolita, the mother of the child was allocated a housing unit through the NHDC. She has also been offered employment by my Ministry as General Worker at Mahebourg Creativity Centre since July 2005.

In the case of Anne Jenia Arekion, psychological support was provided to the mother and father.

In the case of Anousha Bannee, following information received on the death of Anousha Bannee, a first intervention was effected by two officers of the Child Development Unit of my Ministry, Child Development, Family Welfare and Consumer Protection. It was found that the brother of the victim, Ryan was in danger. Following statement of mother to the Police, minor Ryan was removed from custody of mother’s concubin and brought to Victoria Hospital on same night and this initiative was taken by the Child Development Unit. Child was examined by doctors and admitted in hospital. He is still there. Follow-up is being ensured by Child Development Unit of my Ministry.

A psychological session was held with minor at hospital by psychologist of my Ministry on Monday 17 July 2006.

Emergency Protection Order was applied for by my Ministry and issued by District Magistrate of Rose Hill on Tuesday 18 July 2006 for Ministry to have legal custody of the child.

There is Police patrol near Ward B 9 of Victoria Hospital where the minor is admitted.

Arrangements have been made in the Emergency Protection Order to place minor Rayan at our Shelter when the minor will be discharged from hospital.

Mr Speaker, Sir, psychological follow-up will continue.

With regard to part (b) of the question, measures taken by my Ministry to address the issue of violence and sexual abuse against children are as follows –

- As soon as information is received about the death of a minor, officers of the Child Development Unit of my Ministry report at the premises of the victim to find out whether there are any other siblings who are in danger.
- Psychological support is immediately given to the immediate family members of the victim. In cases of minors who are at risk, arrangements are made by my Ministry to remove the child/children and place him/them in a secured place, where psychological follow-up to lessen trauma is ensured.
- Following the death of the first child in July 2005, I immediately called for a meeting with stakeholders and NGOs nation-wide catering for the protection and welfare of children and religious bodies to enlist their suggestions, participation and commitment with a view to preventing recurrence of similar crimes. A plan of action is being worked out with these NGOs.

Measures to combat abuse and violence against children have been revisited and new steps taken namely -

- A Child Mentoring Programme whereby children with behavioural and emotional difficulties is being introduced.
- A Community Child Protection Programme to see to the mobilisation and involvement of the community is also under way.
- Information, Education & Communication Campaigns have been accelerated.
- Training in Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children matters as well as training of caregivers in rehabilitation centres and psychological rehabilitation of victims of sexual abuse have been intensified.
- A workshop on School Child Protection Policy was held in June 2006 with head teachers and other educators and PTAs to sensitise them on their role as child protectors. This was recently done, Mr Speaker, Sir.
- Outreach Programmes in high-risk areas have been undertaken with a view to identifying children at risk.
- A foster care programme is being implemented to provide a family environment to abandoned or neglected children.
- A protocol of assistance to victims of sexual abuse is being implemented in all hospitals since March 2006.

In addition, the Police which collaborates closely with my Ministry is taking the following steps -

- (i) Training of 30 officers to reinforce the *brigade des mineurs*.
- (ii) New vehicles for the brigade will soon be purchased.
- (iii) Information and education campaigns in schools, colleges and stakeholders, NGOs, *forces vives* are under way.
- (iv) Crime Prevention Unit is being intensified.
- (v) The Police Family Protection Unit-Sensitization Campaigns are ongoing.
- (vi) A new protocol of assistance to victims of abuse is very closely followed.
- (vii) Crime Intelligence Cell – collecting information – intelligence gathering for risk areas, especially among vulnerable groups are being attended to.
- (viii) Scheme for Prevention – Police Public Partnership Policy to sensitize the public on crime prevention, is being done in a very aggressive manner.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, I thank the hon. Minister for her answer. One crime against a child is one crime too many and the last week-end all the papers had on their front page ...

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition cannot refer to the press report in the House. Nobody is answerable or can assume responsibility for what the press has published. The Minister cannot be answerable of what the press has published.

Mr Bodha: What I am saying, Mr Speaker, Sir, that it is a matter of national concern and I will refer to the answer given by the hon. Minister to PQ No. I B/27 on 09.08.05 where she declared that she had a meeting with the Commissioner of Police in view of devising strategies for such crimes not to recur. May I ask the hon. Minister how far the strategies have been effective? Because, in fact, we have had a recurrence of a series of those crimes against children.

Mrs Seebun: First of all, Mr Speaker, Sir, I am very relieved to hear the Leader of the Opposition, hon. Bodha, say that this matter is of national concern and it is above *politique partisane* which all of us would rightly agree to. Coming to the question, as soon as I took office, I personally met the Commissioner of Police in the presence of my previous Permanent Secretary and I did call upon his assistance to see how the *brigade des mineurs* could become more aggressive and how patrol could be done in high risk areas so that, in advance, we can come to know if any child is at risk. Last Wednesday on TV, I called upon the mass, and even the media, to come forward and help us to create a strong community base assistance whereby anyone hearing a noise or even an outcry made by a child should report it very quickly through our hotline 113. I personally feel that a person who is consciously aware of a child in danger and does not report it to my Ministry should be condemned in one way or the other.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister has not answered my question. What I am saying is that the hon. Minister had a meeting with the Commissioner of Police one year from now and no strategies have been devised because crimes have recurred. Let me ask another question. Mr

Speaker, Sir, at that point in time, the hon. Minister also said that she would come with an Action Plan. In fact, she has raised the same issue and given the same answer now. I would like to ask what has been done in a year and what are going to be the priorities of that Action Plan?

Mrs Seebun: Sir, I have already presented my paper in Cabinet and I am coming up with the mentoring programme. I will take a few minutes to explain what the mentoring programme is all about. Whenever a child is at risk, we cannot just remove that child from his natural habitat, from his home and put him or her in an institution where the child will feel, maybe, even lost. The Ministry felt the need to identify proper personalities, responsible people from the age of 35 and 60, give them appropriate training so that they go, very slowly, in a very subtle manner, to that specific household and then take the child on board so that he or she may be prepared for life. The child will be given adequate affection, especially self-confidence. The mentor will be working in close collaboration with all the members of the family and especially help all the children to grow in a very proper manner.

Mr Bodha: The hon. Minister has given one aspect of the priorities. I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether she believes that beyond the abuse of children, we have, a bigger issue of the family unit which is in danger in Mauritius, how does she reconcile her Action Pan with the priority that we have today, *que nous devons être au chevet de la famille mauricienne parcequ'elle connaît un malaise aujourd'hui avec tous les problèmes sociaux que traverse le pays?*

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, on the 27th of May 2006, we did organise a national workshop just to enlist the collaboration of parents especially, because we do believe that we have to carry out marriage enrichment programmes and, what is more important, to involve men as partners. A woman is not the only member responsible for the *sérénité* in her house. Ever since I have taken office, we are involving men as equal partners and we are doing this nationwide, so that men feel equally responsible. Why only men, Mr Speaker, Sir? All of us here in the House are equally responsible for whatever is happening in the country; and we have to selflessly bring our support.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Minister means gender equality.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me come to one crucial issue. In many cases, the children died because the violence caused was not detected at a point where we could have saved the child. The hon. Minister raised the problem of the duty to inform. Section 11 of the Child Protection Act puts the onus on any member of the medical profession examining a child and any member of the school attending to a child to inform the Ministry. May I ask the hon. Minister whether there have been many cases where medical practitioners and members of the teaching staff have alerted the Ministry about cases of alleged violence against children? How many cases have there been? My second question is whether she is contemplating the possibility of amending the law so that the duty to inform rests not only on members of the medical profession and members of the educational sector, but on everybody so that we have this duty to inform whenever we see that there is violence against a child?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, what the hon. the Leader of the Opposition just said, I said it last Wednesday. I was myself astounded and surprised that – because the child was attending school - the teacher did not notice all those bruises. This is why I said it loud and clear on TV last Wednesday that it surprised me. I alerted the public at large that teachers have to feel equally responsible. I am very happy that the Leader of the Opposition is on the same wavelength. This is again an opportunity to make a national call so that, not only parents, but neighbours and teachers are equally alert to the miseries of small children who are at risk.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister has stated in her answer that there has been a study carried out, wherein they have identified the high risk regions. Does not she think proper to publicise this list to create a nationwide awareness on all those regions at risk and especially on those children at risk?

Mrs Seebun: Certainly, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Mrs Labelle: The hon. Minister mentioned, in one of her answers, the advantage of not removing children from their family environment, that's why she is coming with a scheme of mentors. May I know from the hon. Minister whether, before taking the decision, in the case of little Ryan, of placing him in a shelter, has a social inquiry been carried on with the immediate family? Because the grand-father seems to be caring for the child.

Has an inquiry been carried on so that this child can find a family environment?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, before even taking the decision as to whether care would be given within the household or the child should necessarily be put in a shelter, this will be decided first. If we find that the child is badly exposed and such care cannot be given by a mentor and he needs a hundred per cent care in one of our shelters, we are going to take decisions accordingly after a careful study, as the hon. Member said.

Mr Ganoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, I did not hear the hon. Minister include, among the measures taken by her Ministry to address the above issues, the urgency of amending the Child Protection Act. There is need to update this law, which was passed in 1994 and amended subsequently. One of the issues is to broaden this category of person on whom a duty to report of suspicion of ill-treatment of children should be imposed.

Mr Speaker: Can the hon. Member put the question?

Mr Ganoo: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether she should not come urgently to the House with an updated version of the Child Protection Act to cater for this issue raised by the Leader of the Opposition and two other issues - the urgency of updating the law for DNA testing to be taken on persons suspected of a serious sexual offence against a child; for those people, who are being convicted of assault against children, there is a necessity to release them on licence and under close surveillance. I think we have to update our Child Protection Act.

Mrs Seebun: There are two parts to this question, Mr Speaker, Sir. Regarding the first part of the question, our Ministry is soon coming up with a Child Act which is a single piece of legislation relating to all problems concerning children. Regarding the second part of the question, my friend, the Attorney General, hon. Rama Valayden, is looking into the legal aspect of the matter.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, my question relates to the rehabilitation of the child. Would the hon. Minister agree that, up to now, the rehabilitation of the abused child has been done in a very incoherent manner? Does she propose to set up really a coherent mechanism to take charge of the abused child since the incident happens and to ensure that he or she goes back to the society as a normal child?

Mrs Seebun: We are giving maximum support; by saying so, I don't mean to say that it is perfect. We are willing to improve on existing facilities. We will continue to improve and we are going to give the very best of *encadrement* to every child. This is what the child deserves.

Mrs Grenade: Si l'agresseur présumé est le père ou la mère ou quelqu'un d'autre habitant sous le même toit de l'enfant, est-ce que la ministre peut dire à la Chambre à quel rythme est le suivi qui est porté à l'enfant à risques?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, when an incident like the one which has just occurred, it can be on a daily basis and then it goes on a weekly basis and the psychological support may go on for months, even for a year, until we feel that the child is psychologically set to carry on studies and can stand firmly on his feet.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: May I ask the hon. Minister what mechanism has been put up for three purposes – firstly, for prevention; secondly, for the detection of cases and for the follow-up of children who have been assaulted, and also that of the parents? Because the Leader of the Opposition has just mentioned that it is a family problem. Each case that is detected shows a family's dramatic situation involving many people. I would like to know from the Minister whether a mechanism has been set up to ensure that a proper monitoring is done and what are the elements of that mechanism?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, as regards the detection of children at risk, we are enlisting the help of PTAs, schools and NGOs. I am also personally making a national call to any parent. You would be surprised to learn that even fathers call upon my office to relate their problem. It is not always a man neglecting children, it can also be a woman neglecting her children. I also have cases of men asking for help at the Ministry. The Ministry or the Minister cannot do much alone. It is not humanly possible for me to detect children in difficulty under each roof. I have made a big outcry, I have enlisted the help of all members of the population. Let the stakeholders, let the Ministry know whenever a particular help is needed. We are also launching our Community Child Protection programme in ten districts. As soon as it gets started in a month or so, it will be like a watchdog and I am sure that there'll be fewer cases of children at risk.

Mr Dowarkasing: May I ask the hon. Minister what has been the contribution of the National Children's Council in the endeavour to fight child abuse?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, the job of the National Children's Council is to advise; it is an advisory body. It is the job of the National Children Unit to implement on the basis of all the advices given by the National Children's Council. But, simultaneously, the National Children's Council does organise activities to help children develop. This Government does believe that the children should not be prepared only academically, but there are other preparations so that the child is inculcated with the right values and have self-confidence and be prepared for life. The National Children's Council and the National Children Unit do work jointly.

Mr Jhugroo: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister has spoken of so many mechanisms. May I ask the hon. Minister whether she is satisfied that the Ministry has got sufficient trained persons to look after the battered children?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, it is long overdue. There is a big shortage of Child Welfare Officers; and I am very happy to say that 22 Child Welfare Officers will be recruited in the days to come so that we can work more effectively and give the services required.

Mr Ganoo: Mr Speaker, Sir, has the hon. Minister or has her Ministry been informed that it is being said that Mauritius is becoming a niche for sexual tourism? I am sure the hon. Minister must have read the story of the small boy ...

Mr Speaker: There is no need for the hon. Member to tell it. He should say: "whether the Minister is aware of that".

Mr Ganoo: ... who had to prostitute himself at the hands of foreign sexual predators because of poverty.

Mrs Seebun: I am very happy that the hon. Member has raised this question. But, Mr Speaker, Sir, I wish to inform the House that Mauritius was on the watch list and it is no longer the case now.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, do you have a question to wind up?

(Interruptions)

Order, please! Last question!

Mr Bodha: In view of the complexity of the problem, is the hon. Minister satisfied that she is adopting a holistic view to be able to address this problem in all its complexity?

Mrs Seebun: Mr Speaker, Sir, we do believe that we have to adopt a holistic approach; and no one would like to have a country where, especially our girls under 16, are involved in prostitution and other sex exploitation areas. What we are doing right now – maybe the hon. Member does not know it – we are coming up with a residential ...

Mr Speaker: The question is whether the hon. Minister has a holistic approach.

Mrs Seebun: We do have a holistic approach.

Mr Speaker: Time is over. Next item ‘Questions addressed to Dr. the hon. Prime Minister’, please!