



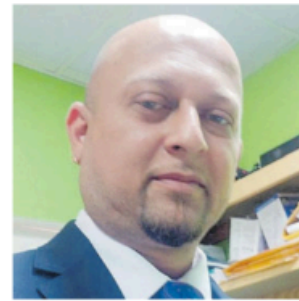
T&T Chamber of Industry & Commerce president
Kiran Maharaj



Downtown Owners and Merchants Association president
Gregory Aboud



President of the Greater San Fernando Chamber of Commerce
Kiran Singh



Eastern Business and Merchants Association president
Ricardo Mohammed



President of the Chaguanas Chamber of Industry and Commerce
Baldath Maharaj

Business leaders call for immediate action in response to 'worrying' crime

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Members of the business community are frustrated and fed up with the recent spate of killings in the country. Business owners told Guardian Media yesterday that not only are they unhappy with the constant loss of lives, but they have been left daunted as the country's economic future is under threat by gun-toting criminals.

T&T recorded 19 murders between Thursday and yesterday. Among those killed were three men who were gunned down outside the Pizza Boys outlet in Cunupia on Sunday afternoon.

A Rio Claro businesswoman identified as Carissa Ramrattan was also shot dead shortly after dropping off her vehicle to be serviced at Toyota Trinidad, South Park, San Fernando, on Saturday.

Police Commissioner Erla Harewood-Christopher and senior officers assured on Sunday that all police officers in stations across the country will be on high alert following the violent and bloody weekend. But this has left business owners sceptical. The time has come for action.

T&T Chamber

President of the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce, Kiran Maharaj, said existing crime-fighting measures have not been yielding the success that her members and the wider public have been hoping for.

"We are very sceptical as to what has been put in place to try and curb the spate of crime. About two years ago, I was very hopeful because I felt that we had a crime conference and there were many discussions. I know that many ideas were put out there, but I have yet to see a holistic and properly coordinated approach with stakeholders to address crime.

Maharaj noted that crime remained a multi-layered issue and said it was time for all stakeholders, not just the Government, to act. "I think they need to get together regularly and consistently with civil society organisations and with business sector organisations to really discuss what has been happening and ideas. In business, we are

seeing where there may be opportunities to curb it. The civil society organisations work on the ground and know where these things are happening; they too have ideas. But I am not seeing the kind of round table discussions to really deal with this situation."

Maharaj also lamented the impact crime has been having on commerce. "The members are very disgruntled; some want to reinvest in their country but are apprehensive about it because, at the end of the day, they don't feel safe."

DOMA

President of the Downtown Owners and Merchants Association, Gregory Aboud, explained that the brazenness of criminals continues to point to a lack of fear for the authorities and that it was time for immediate action.

"We are living in a country where no one is apprehended, this is the gruesome truth of these gruesome crimes and all the press conferences in the world, not wanting to demean or diminish the pronouncements made, but all the press conferences in the world are not going to make any more difference unless we start seeing some fear among criminals."

Greater San Fernando Area Chamber

The president of the Greater San Fernando Area Chamber of Commerce, Kiran Singh, meanwhile, stated that crime has infiltrated south Trinidad and injected fear into the members of the business community.

"There are growing concerns in the business community that more has to be done in terms of protecting the investments of business houses and entrepreneurs and executives who go about their daily businesses. For whatever reason people are being murdered, we need to get it addressed in the shortest possible time to ensure there is no more fallout from the business sector in terms of investment, especially given that the engine of growth is in the non-energy sector."

In response to the uptick in murders, the chamber president called for the implementation of a full complement of TTPS and municipal officers on the ground, as well

as joint army and police patrols. He also agitated for the use of drone technology to track down criminals.

Singh said his organisation has been engaging in discussions with the TTPS and the mayor of San Fernando about areas to be patrolled.

Arima Business Association

Arima Business Association (ABA) believes the Government's fixation on the Firearms User's Licence (FUL) issue needs to stop. President of the association, Christian Rampersad, said the focus should be on illegal firearms being used by criminals.

"We, the ABA, believe that an intelligence-driven and co-ordinated, targeted approach to the crime is required from the TTPS and, if necessary, with the assistance of the TPDF," Rampersad said.

"The fixation of this administration on the FUL issue needs to stop. The facts are clear: less than one per cent of gun-related incidents are caused by FUL holders. Therefore, more than 99 per cent of these gun-related incidents involve illegal firearms. The focus should be on illegal firearms and not FUL holders."

Eastern Business And Merchants Association

Meanwhile, Ricardo Mohammed, president of the Eastern Business and Merchants Association (EBMA) said their members are "extremely concerned with the high state of crime" within the eastern region and, by extension, Tobago. People in the area are living in fear, he added. "We are accustomed to our area being one of the safest districts throughout our twin island republic. Crime has gotten significantly out of control. Home invasions, robberies, murders, double murders, and multiple murders are a clear indication that the crime situation is not being managed under the existing TTPS and the Ministry of National Security.

"Billions of dollars have been spent in the last ten years, and we have made no progress. In the private sector, people would be fired for such blatant non-performance and wastage of funds with no tangible results.

"Citizens of the East are living in fear; the business community no

longer has a thriving evening business because customers are scared to shop in the evening, and businesses are closing earlier to prevent late-night robberies. It is sad to see our beloved towns in the East becoming ghost towns after 7 pm."

Mohammed said those in authority need to get serious. "We must ask why existing strategies are not working, how often they are reviewed, whether they are upgraded to achieve positive outcomes, and who are the people entrusted to carry out, implement, assess, review, and execute these strategies. Current crime prevention strategies have failed," he added.

Those entrusted with the responsibility to deal with crime must be held accountable, he said.

Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce

The Chaguanas Chamber of Commerce is raising an urgent call to action as local businesses grapple with an escalating wave of crime that includes murders, extortion, robberies, and home invasions.

Chamber head Baldath Maharaj said, "While the recent response from the Commissioner of Police was anticipated, it has not alleviated the concerns of our business community. There is a sense of disillusionment with the Ministry of National Security, as businessmen have lost faith in the current measures being taken. The statements made by the commissioner are perceived as public relations manoeuvres rather than actionable solutions to our situation. These responses are forthcoming every time there is a spike in murders."

Maharaj said some of their members have scaled down their businesses and are staying away from the day-to-day running of their operations because of extortion threats.

The chamber is now calling for:

1. Measurable reductions in crime on a month-to-month basis.
2. Enhanced police presence and quick response time.
3. A comprehensive security plan developed in collaboration with business leaders, law enforcement, and community stakeholders.

Maharaj said, "This chamber stands ready to work with the authorities to develop and implement these measures. The time for talk

Prof Deosaran: It is very worrying; we have been looking at the trees rather than the forest

Criminologist Prof Ramesh Deosaran has said that the police's recent response to the bloodshed may be lacking. He noted that placing law enforcement on high alert, paired with low police detection and prosecution, cannot abate crime. "It is very worrying; we have been looking at the trees rather than the forest. In the architecture that governs crime management and control, putting the stations on alert may be necessary but not sufficient.

"But the detection rate, surveillance, and quick intelligence with all the technology that we have, as well as an increase in street lights and cameras, are important."

He said until we start working from top to bottom, "we have a long way to go to solve these frightful murder rates."

Prof Deosaran further contended that the apparent fear of stalking citizens appears similar to one of the darkest periods in the country's history. "The public has never been so concerned as it was during July 1990," he added.

—With reporting by Andrea Perz-Sobers and Shastri Boodan

Deputy Commissioner of Police: There will be increased police visibility

During an interview with Guardian Media, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Junior Benjamin stated that increased police visibility is expected as the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service switch gears into "high alert".

On Sunday senior police officers led by top CoP Erla Harewood-Christopher revealed that the service will be on high alert in response to the uptick in brazen murders.

"We are going to be talking to persons and interacting with persons, it is where the police service will be seen and felt and we are asking the public to have patience with us because we are out there and there are times you might find yourself in roadblocks and so forth we asking you to bear with us because this situation has called for the police to respond and we will respond and ensure safety is the priority of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service."

has passed; we need decisive action that restores confidence and ensures the safety and prosperity of our business community."