



Vigil for Reform

15 February, 2021

The kidnapping and death of Andrea Bharatt, following closely on the heels of several abductions, sexual assaults and murders of women prompted widespread vigils across Trinidad and Tobago and a call for voluntary business closures last Friday. These actions taken by our population are indicative of a wind of change that is blowing in our country – Trinidad and Tobago will not accept the status quo.

There are many layers to what is currently unfolding. The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce (T&T Chamber) recognises that as citizens we also have to accept responsibility and work towards changing societal and cultural norms towards gender-based violence. However, the underlying issues that have eroded the population's confidence in the authorities' ability to keep citizens safe and secure are far from new. Many point back to issues which the Chamber has consistently flagged over years especially in relation to inefficiencies in our justice system and a need for reform. It is a well-known fact that our courts are overburdened and work with outdated infrastructure. Accused persons are sent to remand, which can extend for years before their case is heard. Cases are often stood down or dismissed because parties are not present to give evidence. And many laws – like those for getting a vehicle licence plate – are hopelessly outdated.

The Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago guarantees, inter alia, first and foremost the right of the individual to life, liberty, security of the person, and also to freedom of movement. The high incidence of persons who have disappeared without a trace and unsolved kidnappings, disappearances and murders is cause for alarm.

So too is the death of two suspects in the Bharatt case while in police custody; death in custody being a matter which prompts far-reaching investigations in other countries. We look forward to a full and transparent investigation of this matter.

We call on all political parties to put aside their differences and work together to do what is in the best interest on the country. The T&T Chamber has participated in many stakeholder initiatives in the fight against crime and stands ready to continue collaborating with stakeholders. In addition, through our Crime and Justice Committee we have worked with the Coalition Against Domestic Violence to develop and publish a Domestic Violence in the Workplace Policy, which we have encouraged corporate entities to adopt or adapt.

The fear that is stalking our citizens, particularly females, is not to be ignored. The calls for reform must not be allowed to fizzle out into another nine-day wonder.

Strengthening of our legislative framework must continue, structures to provide support and counselling to victims of abuse must be properly resourced, strengthening forensic science capabilities to aid in solving crimes must be treated with. Our citizens are owed no less.

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