



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

The Honourable Camille Robinson-Regis, MP
Minister of Housing and Urban Development

MEDIA RELEASE
GOVERNMENT REJECTS MISREPRESENTATION OF HOUSING AND SQUATTING POLICIES

February 13, 2025, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: The Minister of Housing and Urban Development categorically rejects the misleading claims presented in the Sunday Express editorial, "Housing Headache Needs Urgent Medication," and the recent article by MP Rushton Paray, "Lack of Structured Policies to Address Squatting Crisis." Both articles irresponsibly misrepresent the realities of the housing sector and dismiss the Government's extensive efforts to provide structured, sustainable, and legal housing solutions for low- and middle-income families.

The editorial irresponsibly claims that the Government is "failing" to provide adequate housing solutions. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MHUD) has been at the forefront of structured, sustainable, and legal housing initiatives, ensuring that low- and middle-income families have access to affordable homes.

In fiscal year 2024 alone, the Government disbursed Home Improvement Grants benefiting around 800 households. Additionally, it provided roughly 450 Home Improvement Subsidies, 163 Home Construction Subsidies, and starter homes under the Housing and Village Improvement Program (HVIP) to about 103 families in need.

The Government has also partnered with the private sector to expand housing access. Just last Friday, the Honourable Prime Minister cut the ribbon at the City Heights Development Project in San Fernando, a Public-Private Partnership that adds 90 new apartments to the national housing stock. These are tangible, impactful initiatives that completely contradict the Sunday Express's claim that low-income housing is being neglected.

The editorial's claim that the housing sector is plagued by "inefficiency and bobol" is not only unfounded but also irresponsible. The MHUD operates with strict adherence to procurement laws and transparent allocation processes, ensuring fairness, accountability, and effective management of public resources. Such sweeping and baseless accusations undermine the diligent work being done to provide equitable housing solutions for citizens.

The Housing Development Corporation (HDC) adheres to an objective and verifiable system, which includes:

- 60% of allocations are assigned through a live draw process, ensuring fair and transparent selection.
- 25% allocated to emergency cases or individuals recommended by the Minister, including victims of disasters and domestic violence.
- 10% reserved for members of the protective services and defense forces.
- 5% designated for the elderly and individuals with disabilities.

Upon returning to Office, this Government, under the Honourable Prime Minister, restored the HDC to its intended purpose—to provide subsidized housing for low- to middle-income families. In the 2017 Budget Statement, the Honourable Minister of Finance reaffirmed this commitment:

"To ensure that the housing needs of our lower- and middle-income groups are being met, the Government has taken the decision to increase the qualifying monthly income from \$10,000 to \$14,000 and the property value from \$850,000 to \$1M in order for persons to access the 2% financing regime; in respect of the 5% facility, the lower limit of \$10,001.00 has been moved to \$14,001.00 with a higher limit of no more than \$30,000.00. This would allow for the purchase of properties up to \$1.5M."

These reforms have expanded access to housing for more than 6,000 families, ensuring that state housing subsidies benefit those who need them most, rather than those who can already afford private housing.

Both the editorial and MP Paray's article irresponsibly downplay the seriousness of squatting and misrepresent the Government's organized policies on the issue. Squatting is illegal, with many individuals knowingly occupying state lands despite eviction notices. It is not just a matter of housing shortage—it is a violation of the law that undermines national development.

MP Paray's claim that the Government has not implemented policies to address squatting is misleading. The Government has established legislative frameworks to tackle squatting sustainably. A key initiative is the Land Settlement Agency (LSA), which operates under Section 5(4) of the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act (SLRT). Suggesting that such a framework doesn't exist misrepresents reality. The LSA, established by the 1998 SLRT Act, actively manages squatting and illegal occupation of State lands. The Act provides a structured legal approach to regularising squatters' tenure, addressing significant legal and social challenges. The LSA's mandate includes regularisation of squatters and the development of sustainable communities, aspects overlooked in MP Paray's critique.

Furthermore, the LSA's policy framework indeed incorporates the regularisation of squatters, the creation of land settlement zones, and the support of leases for qualified squatters. These initiatives have already yielded positive results in numerous locations, including Pine Settlement, Windy Hill, and Cashew Gardens. Residents in these communities have experienced significant advancements in infrastructure—such as roads, electricity, sanitation, and clean drinking water—essential for alleviating the negative effects of squatting on public health and safety. These efforts extend beyond mere

administrative measures; they signify considerable, concrete enhancements in the quality of life for thousands of citizens.

It must be noted that the argument about conflicting ownership—whether the land belongs to private entities like Clico and HCL or the Commissioner of State Lands—holds no weight. Regardless of ownership, illegal occupation remains unlawful. Squatting is not justified by uncertainty; it is a violation of the law, plain and simple.

MP Paray's claim that squatter communities have been neglected by the Government ignores the extensive work the LSA has undertaken in this area. For instance, the LSA's comprehensive development works in squatter settlements are underpinned by rigorous planning, including obtaining necessary regulatory approvals, conducting land surveys, and working closely with utilities providers. Far from neglecting squatter communities, the Government has shown sustained commitment to improving their living conditions, as evidenced by projects funded through the Public Sector Investment Programme and loans from the Inter-American Development Bank.

Moreover, the Government has taken a targeted approach to squatting in urban areas, particularly through initiatives such as the Regularisation and Regeneration of Communities in the Greater Port of Spain Region Programme. This initiative aims to address the specific challenges faced by informal communities in urban environments, providing much-needed infrastructure such as roads, drainage systems, and pedestrian access. These interventions are designed not just to improve the quality of life but to make urban areas safer, more resilient, and conducive to sustainable development. MP Paray's apparent oversight of these efforts reveals a serious lack of understanding of the Government's comprehensive approach to urban squatting.

Another key initiative that MP Paray overlooks is the 2017 policy for Certificate of Comfort holders to transition to Statutory Leases. This policy provides squatters with an opportunity to gain legal title to the land they occupy, offering long-term security of tenure and the ability to use that lease as collateral for financing. This is a progressive step forward, offering families security while also enabling them to improve their livelihoods. By shifting the focus from temporary relief to long-term solutions, this policy directly contradicts the assertion that the Government is not addressing the issue of tenure insecurity among squatters.

The Tenancy Policy introduced in 2020 is another testament to the Government's proactive stance on addressing squatting. This policy facilitates the regularisation of squatters who do not fall under the SLRT Act, giving them a legal framework to secure their tenure. The issuance of short-term tenancy agreements is followed by an opportunity for long-term regularisation, making the process both structured and equitable. The Government's ability to manage such a large-scale policy and program is an indicator of the seriousness with which it treats the squatting issue—something MP Paray has failed to fully appreciate in his critique.

Additionally, the HVIP launched in 2017 is another critical piece of the puzzle. By offering free starter homes to families living in substandard conditions, the Government is not just improving physical infrastructure but is also addressing broader issues of poverty and access to basic services. The HVIP demonstrates the Government's understanding that squatting is not merely an issue of land occupation but one that intersects with poverty, housing inequality, and lack of access to adequate infrastructure. It is a comprehensive, long-term solution to the problem of squatting.

While MP Paray seems to suggest that squatting is a problem that can be resolved simply by halting evictions, this position completely disregards the long-term consequences of unregulated land occupation. Squatting on State lands, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas like forest reserves and agricultural zones, has far-reaching consequences for both the environment and national security. Unchecked squatting encroaches on vital resources, disrupts national infrastructure, and creates public health risks. It is not just an issue of housing; it is an issue of national development. The Government's stance on enforcement, as unpopular as it may be in some quarters, is essential to protect the broader public interest.

MP Paray's critique fails to acknowledge the crucial role that technology has played in the Government's efforts to address squatting. The LSA has integrated cutting-edge technologies like GIS and drones into its monitoring and management systems. These tools enabled real-time tracking of squatter settlements, improving decision-making and supporting targeted interventions. This innovative use of technology in land management not only enhances the efficiency of the LSA's work but also increases transparency and accountability in the Government's efforts to tackle squatting.

MP Paray's characterization of the Government's approach to squatting as ineffective is wholly inaccurate and fails to acknowledge the structured, multifaceted strategies in place. The Government has implemented legal frameworks, infrastructure development, housing initiatives, and innovative technological solutions to address the issue in a sustainable and transparent manner. Likewise, the Sunday Express has failed to provide a balanced, fact-based analysis of the housing sector, instead promoting misinformation that misrepresents the Government's efforts. Sustainable housing solutions require responsible urban planning, lawful land use, and structured policies—not sensationalist narratives that ignore the complexities of the issue. The MHUD remains steadfast in its commitment to expanding access to adequate, affordable, and legal housing for all citizens, guided by accountability, transparency, and the rule of law.

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