

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION B/444

PQ B/444 The Honourable Second Member for Savanne and Black River (Mrs Hanoomanjee)

To ask Dr the Honourable Minister of Agro Industry and Fisheries:-

Whether, in regard to the sugar cane lands belonging to the small planters, he will state if a survey has been carried out to assess the extent thereof and, if so, indicate (a) the extent thereof considered to be in an abandoned state, indicating the reasons therefore and (b) the acreage thereof that has been earmarked for food production?

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REPLY

Mr Speaker, Sir,

The last survey of abandoned sugar cane lands of small planters was conducted jointly by the Farmers Service Corporation and the Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute in 1996. The survey indicated that the trend at which cane cultivation was abandoned for the period 1986/1996 was extremely high. This ranged from 900 to 1000 hectares from 1991 to 1995. In view of the high rate of abandonment, a special promotion campaign was launched in 1996 itself. It included :

- Talks and meetings by FSC officers for small planters.
- Meetings and discussions by MSIRI for medium and large planters.
- A T.V. clip produced by the Mauritius College of the Air in collaboration with PROSI, FSC and the Ministry of Agriculture was shown on T.V. at regular intervals.
- Formulation of a special package of incentives to promote re-plantation.

On the other hand, each year, the Sugar Insurance Fund Board conducts field inspections for insurance purposes. The outcome of such inspections followed by the registration of holdings of the planters with the SIFB for harvest purposes may give an indication of the extent of land abandoned or put to other uses. In fact, the extent of harvested areas of small planters has systematically decreased from 21,703 hectares in 2003 to 19,015 hectares in 2007, confirming the analysis of the 1996 survey. Overall, total harvested area has decreased from 69,995 hectares in 2003 to 63,188 hectares in 2007.

As indicated in the 1996 Report, small planters abandon their lands for a variety of reasons which are still valid. These include high costs of production, land located in difficult areas, unavailability or shortage of labour, low price of sugar, lack of irrigation water, land speculation, old age and inheritance problems. However, Government is not allowing small planters to move out of the process. Instead, we have proposed and is implementing a bold reform programme for the sugar cane industry. This programme provides for a land preparation and regrouping project for small planters. So far, in the first phase, we have completed 350 hectares. Now we are almost completing the

second phase which covers 850 hectares. I must tell you that we are getting very good results. The yield has gone up whereas cost of production has gone down. This success is encouraging a lot of other small planters to join the project. Thus, we have decided to go for a third phase covering 2000 hectares which will start in July 2008.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in respect of part (b) of the question, I must point out that it is not the policy of the Government to abandon the sugar cane industry. I have just referred to the reform programme for the sector. The Multi Annual Adaptation Strategy makes provision for maintaining sugar cane in difficult areas for socio-economic and environmental reasons. Some 12,419 hectares of seaward mountain slopes, inward mountain slopes and undulating slopes are concerned. According to a study conducted by the Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute, in 2006, some 4,460 hectares found in difficult areas would no longer be economically viable for sugar production. Thus, where the planter would be better off in undertaking other activities, we will not object so long as the environment is not adversely affected. But then, we are still concerned about food security. This is why we are encouraging planters to engage in food crop production by making additional land available as follows:

- (a) 419 arpents of state agricultural land to 205 beneficiaries;
- (b) 207 arpents from Rose Belle Sugar Estate, 100 arpents from Sugar Investment Trust and 100 arpents from Mauritius Sugar Producers Association to 371 beneficiaries;
- (c) 14 acres at Plaisance and Richelieu Experimental Stations for onion cultivation; and
- (c) 100 arpents at Cote D'Or for potato production by the Mauritius Agricultural Marketing Co-operative Federation.

As the House is aware, my Ministry together with the Sugar Investment Trust, the Mauritius Sugar Producers Association and the Rose Belle Sugar Estate has already released 1,300 acres of land for crop diversification and land development.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I also wish to refer the Hon. Member to my reply to the PNQ of 15 April 2008 addressed by the Hon. Leader of Opposition wherein I elaborated on the strategy for food production and the measures to address food security.