

Private Notice Question (15 April 2008)

To ask Dr the Hon. Minister of Agro Industry & Fisheries:-

Whether, in regard to the on-going world food crisis, national food security and Genetically Modified Organisms, he will state:-

- a. the comparative figures for the local production of potatoes, onions, tomatoes, maize, meat, milk and fish for 2000, 2004 and 2007 indicating the new measures being taken to increase production thereof;
- b. the potential for regional co-operation for production of rice, wheat, maize, potatoes and pulses; and
- c. when the Genetically Modified Organisms Act 2004 will be proclaimed, indicating the scope for local and regional production of genetically modified food?

REPLY

Mr. Speaker Sir,

I wish from the outset to highlight that food security is a question of national interest and I thank the Leader of the Opposition for providing me the opportunity to give a thorough review of our agricultural sector strategy and of our long-term food objectives. The days of cheap food are over. Food cost worldwide rose by 23 per cent between 2006 and 2007. This year what is becoming clearer is the impact of such a change on people's lives.

Mr Speaker Sir,

2. The world population has continued to grow while its food production has not. In the past 7 years, the world's population has consumed more grain than it has grown. World grain reserves last year were only 57 days down from 180 days a decade ago. It has also been noted that global warming is cutting into food production.

3. Mauritius, on account of its limited size, the absence of economies of scale and the high comparative advantage of sugar cane both in agro climatic, environmental and economic terms, is compelled to import all the key and essential food items, namely cereals, wheat/flour and rice, pulses, edible oil, meat and dairy products and spices. Inputs for the poultry and egg industries where Mauritius has more or less attained self sufficiency, for instance maize,

have to be imported. Mauritius also imports fruits, oranges, apples, grapes etc, as well as a fair proportion of its potato, onion, garlic and ginger needs.

Mr. Speaker Sir,

4. It may be contended that Mauritius is not in the situation of Bangladesh, Lesotho or Chad and many of the LDCs as its economic development enables it to have the means to procure food. However, the island nature of Mauritius, its economic model and its very limited market are such that it is a country that has to ensure that its production/supply of food is secure and that it cannot afford any disruption in supply. In that sense, the urgent definition of a food security policy is imperative.

5. Economic conditions are such that at best Mauritius can move to enhanced production of vegetables and fruits locally but will have to rely on the region or imports for the bulk of the food it consumes. Accordingly, Mauritius can only aspire for regional food self sufficiency and up to a certain level.

6. Net export earnings from sugar sold to the EU under the Sugar Protocol and the Special Preferential Agreement enabled Mauritius till 2005 to cover the cost of its food imports. Thus Mauritius through its sugar exports had the means to procure its food.

(A) With regard to part (a) of the Question, local production in figures for potatoes, onions, tomatoes, maize, meat, milk and fish for the years 2000, 2004 and 2007 are as follows:

	2000	2004	2007
	(Tonnes)		
Potatoes	13,843	11,246	14,848
Onions	11,485	4,682	4,550
Tomatoes	10,923	14,400	10,158
Maize	623	369	354
Meat	31,224	36,098	42,463
Milk	4,000	4,000	4,500
Fish	9,405	10,927	7,086

Meat production comprises poultry, cattle, goat, sheep and pig and the production statistics by species are given below. We are producing the required amount of chicken meat to reach self-sufficiency.

2000 2004 2007

(Tonnes)

Poultry 31,224 36,098 40,000

Cattle 2,538 2,456 1,847

Goat 86 89 96

Sheep 16 18 3

Pig 891 743 510

7. Mauritius, a small island economy, has always been a net food importing country. Food imports presently account for Rs 18 billion equivalent to 18% of our total import bill. The major items imported include rice, wheat, oil & fats, meat and milk which represent 66 per cent of all food imports. We are all aware that these items cannot be produced in Mauritius for economic and financial reasons. We have achieved self-sufficiency in fresh vegetables, chicken and eggs.

8. Government has been laying emphasis on increased food production and agro processing to reduce our dependency on import. In this context, since April 2007, my Ministry has initiated action for the preparation of a comprehensive strategic document to enhance crop diversification and livestock development. Alongside, an Aquaculture Master Plan for the promotion on aquaculture development in Mauritius has also been elaborated. Both documents have been worked out by dedicated and competent teams of my Ministry and by specialists in the sectors. These documents have been drafted in consultation with all stakeholders through interactive workshops held in the month of April 2007 for aquaculture and August 2007 for crop and livestock development. The draft document for the crop and livestock sector was posted on the website of my Ministry for further inputs. On the other hand, following submission of the final document on aquaculture, the Aquatic Business Activities Bill has been finalized and will be presented in the National Assembly shortly.

9. My Ministry has already taken a number of measures to address food security, namely access to land, land preparation, irrigation, training, research and development and marketing. We are all aware that since year 2000, there

has been an encroachment on prime agricultural land for property development which has become a sector in itself.

Access to land

10. My Ministry along with SIT, MSPA and RBSEB has already released some 1,300 acres of lands for crop diversification and livestock development. Furthermore, an additional 100 A of land at Côte d'Or will be released specially for potato cultivation and 14 acres at Plaisance and Richelieu Stations for onion seeds production.

11. Government is currently negotiating with the MSPA on the 2000 arpents of land for implementation of Empowerment Programme which includes a social programme and agricultural projects. In the Multi Annual Adaptation Strategy document, provision is made for agricultural diversification. It is believed that certain areas that are now under sugar cane will no longer be economically viable for sugar production. MSIRI has conducted a study and found that 4460 hectares in difficult areas fall into this category. It must be mentioned that not all of these lands would be suitable for food crop and livestock production. A large proportion will still be devoted to sugar cane for soil conservation and bio mass production (for energy). Lands that are rocky and slopy will be put under forests. Hence only a small proportion could be made available for agricultural production.

Training and Clustering of planters and breeders

12. Training being important, planters and breeders are being provided training by the Agricultural Research and Extension Unit (AREU) on good agricultural practices, agro processing and animal husbandry respectively to enable them to adopt modern agricultural techniques for productivity improvement and also for minimizing post harvest losses. AREU is working closely with the planters and breeders and is dispensing advice and training to them to address issues relating to crop production and animal rearing. The training programmes, in collaboration with IVTB are currently being run in four regional Model Farms. A Farmers Training School approved by MQA will be constructed shortly at Wooton and will become operational as from this year. With this additional facility, training needs of planters and breeders will be addressed in a more focussed and professional manner.

13. My Ministry is laying emphasis on clustering of producers to take advantage of economies of scale. A milk village at Nouvelle Decouverte, a hydroponic village at Rose Belle and 15 fruit villages for 8 fruits across the island have been set up.

Marketing

14. Marketing of non sugar commodities has been regulated to some extent by the Agricultural Marketing Board. Marketing of many vegetables has been characterized by price fluctuations. To address this issue, a national market information system is being put in place to allow producers to better plan their production and to avoid creation of gluts on the market.

15. Producers and other stakeholders will also be encouraged to practice better post handling management to minimize post harvest losses. Besides technical support, the stakeholders are being encouraged through the Agricultural Technology Diffusion Scheme to improve the product quality standards for domestic and tourist market and to prepare themselves for global gap certification.

16. Research and Development

Institutions involved in research and development play a crucial role in all endeavours relating to food security. These institutions generate and assess new technologies, disseminate information and provide training to producers and entrepreneurs. Facilities will be provided to upgrade the delivery of services by the R & D institutions.

17. Irrigation

Water is a vital input for sustainable agricultural production. Investment in irrigation network has so far focused on sugar cane although a number of small holder schemes have been put in place. Measures will be proposed for producers involved in diversification to have access to irrigation water and the necessary irrigation equipment and accessories through a support scheme. More versatile irrigation systems for diversification will be proposed.

18. My Ministry has initiated some key actions on priority commodities for attaining greater food security namely potato, onion, tomato and milk.

Potatoes

19. We expect to reach a higher self-sufficiency for potato (currently at 50%) by year 2015 through the boost-up scheme by the Agricultural Marketing Board (AMB), adoption of new varieties from MSIRI and crop insurance scheme by the Small Planters Welfare Fund to mitigate risk.

(i) As the cost of potato seeds accounts for 60% of cost of production, the AMB advances the potato seeds to the planter and the latter undertakes to supply back to the AMB and minimum quantity of ware potatoes. The cost of the seeds is then deducted from the proceeds of the ware potato.

(ii) An extent of 625 hectare of land is under cultivation by sugar estate and small planters. Under the 500A scheme, the major bulk will be under potato production. An additional land of 100 A at Cote d'or has been recently released for production.

(iii) MSIRI has already undertaken research on the new Belle Isle variety which is a high yielding variety and has invited planters to cultivate same. MSIRI will pursue further research on other varieties.

(iv) Import of potato seeds is being liberalised which will allow operators to have control over the whole chain of activities.

(v) An increase in the floor price of potato as a measure to encourage production is currently under consideration at the AMB;

(vi) Agri Business Operators have been invited to take advantage of schemes under the DCP and empowerment programme. They will be assisted by AREU for their project write-ups;

(vii) AREU is dispensing training on production and post-harvest technology.

Onions

20.(i) The floor price of onion has been increased from Rs 9,700 per tonne to Rs 17,000 per tonne as from November 2007;

(ii) Two new varieties namely Bella Rose and Francesca have been developed and released by AREU. Both varieties are high yielding, 25 tonnes per hectare;

(iii) Government is encouraging planters to extend the harvest period by adopting the practice of seedling production under ATDS scheme;

(iv) 14 Acres of land at Plaisance and Richelieu Stations have been released for the production of onion seeds;

(v) Irrigation is provided in major onion producing localities like Belle Mare and La Chaumiere;

(vi) A mechanisation unit at my Ministry is assisting planters in land preparation

(vii) AREU has already initiated action to train planters to undertake onion seed production;

(viii) On value addition, AREU has developed seven protocols to onions products (dehydrated, pickle, powder, frozen slices and paste etc).

For onions, new varieties are being promoted especially for extending the shelf life and cultivation periods. AMB has also raised the floor price of onions from Rs 9,700 per tonne to Rs 17,000 per tonne in November last year to encourage planters to increase production. Planters are encouraged to produce tomatoes for canning and processing purposes. In the milk sector our efforts are supplemented through other programs like DCP and Empowerment Programme and incentives offered by the Ministry of Industry, SME, Commerce and Cooperatives.

Milk Sector

21. (interruptions)

(B) Regarding part (b), access to land in the neighbouring region to produce food crops to meet our local requirements has been prospected within the cross-border initiative. It is relevant to point out that a Mozambique Desk was set in 1998 but there has been no follow up action. During my visit to Mozambique in March last, I signed a Memorandum of Agreement for 5000 hectares of land for the production of potato, onion, maize and other vegetable crops. A Consortium comprising SIT, SIC, STC and Rose Belle SE is in the process of being set up to facilitate investment in Mozambique and a techno economic plan will be prepared. A fact finding visit to Mozambique is being fielded in the very near future to identify and characterize the block of 5000 hectares. A proposal will be made to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development to provide a scheme to facilitate and expedite launching.

2. Regarding Madagascar, the issue of land for food crop cultivation is still being negotiated with the relevant authorities. Negotiations for import of cattle from Madagascar have reached an advanced stage and an MOU on sanitary conditions will be signed by the two countries in due course. Moreover, another Memorandum of Understanding on Phytosanitary Cooperation between our two countries to facilitate trade in food crops will be signed this week. Possibilities will be explored with the Malagasy authorities for the production of rice, wheat and maize.

3. A series of consultations have been held with planters and breeders and they have agreed to fully participate and have requested for additional support to boost up their activities. Accordingly, a list of incentives and schemes has been submitted to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning & Development in the context of the new Budget. These include proposals for funds under MAAS to be earmarked for crops that will enhance food security, for fine land preparation, for research and a line of credit to DBM for agricultural loans at a concessionary rate of 3%. Furthermore, the scope of

Empowerment Programme will be broadened to include specific agricultural activities. Additional fiscal incentives on equipment, vehicles and various agricultural inputs have also been proposed.

4. I had a preliminary meeting in February last with the Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture on crop diversification. I shall shortly pursue the matter further with representatives of the corporate sector for their full participation in cross border initiatives and agricultural diversification to ensure food security in Mauritius.

(C) The Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) Act was passed in the National Assembly in April, 2004. Only sections 1 to 6(1)(a) and 6(1)(c) and Section 24 (on short title, interpretation, application of the Act, National Biosafety Committee, objects of the Committee and functions of the Committee) have been proclaimed and came into effect on 01 January, 2005. The National Biosafety Committee was constituted in April, 2005.

Mr Speaker Sir,

2. The Honourable Leader of Opposition is well aware that in order to fully enforce a piece of legislation, it is vital to have the required Regulations. At time of proclamation of part of the GMO Act, there were no regulations in place. A technical Committee has now worked out these Regulations

3. This Committee comprised representatives of my Ministry, University of Mauritius, AREU, MSIRI, State Law Office, the Secretary General of ACIM and was chaired by the Chairperson of the National Biosafety Committee.

These regulations which relate to:

- a. Consignment in transit;
- b. Labelling of GMO's;
- c. Laboratory development of GMO's;
- d. Standards to which facilities dealing with GMO's should conform and;
- e. Containment facility requirement for GMO's

have now been submitted to the State Law Office for vetting.

4. The major GM crops available and grown on a large scale are soyabean, maize, cotton, canola. In the region, only South Africa is growing GMO crops

namely maize, soyabean and cotton on some 1.8million hectare of land. It is presently ranked 8th in the world among countries growing GM crops.

5. As regards scope for local and regional production of GM foods, the only two possibilities are maize and soya beans for the time-being, especially for the region. But this will be subject to local regulations and favourable economics of production.

Mr. Speaker Sir,

6. For any GM crop to be used as food, it is imperative that safety evaluation of the product be carried out.

7. We have currently 2 projects on capacity building to end by 2010, funded by UNEP/GEF on capacity building to establish a transparent and workable national bio-safety framework.

8. The whole issue of food security I reiterate is of national interest and therefore needs the active participation of all stakeholders. I hope I can rely on such collaboration.