

# Our Transportation System is in Crisis - 83

Monday September 10, 2007 was a disaster! Traffic heading west towards POS stood almost standstill on the Uriah Butler and Solomon Hchoy Highways up to Freeport in the south and on the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway in the east as far as Piarco. The westbound lane on the Eastern Main Road was also backed up for many kilometres. I was stuck on the UBH and suspected that the cause of the delays might have been due to something on the CRH, such as a serious traffic accident, or licensing officers choosing to conduct vehicle condition surveys, or the Police checking for bandits, etc. so I decided to use the EMR. I had not used the CRH on the weekend and so did not remember that paving works were being undertaken on the westbound carriageway of the CRH near Aranguez. I understand that the journey time of some people was more than three hours to arrive in POS. It was only in the late afternoon when I heard the press briefing of the Minister of Works and Transport that I found out what was the problem.

About a 1.5 km of the entire width of the westbound roadway surface of the CRH between Aranguez and El Socorro was milled about 75mm deep, in preparation for new asphalt paving, and there remained a significant drop from the existing road surface onto the milled surface. Every motorist was therefore slowing down to an almost complete stop in order to traverse this sharp edge without damaging his vehicle. It was forgotten that some fresh asphalt was needed to create a gently sloping ramp as a temporary transition from the existing road level to the milled level, until the milled area was paved. Both the contractor as well as the supervisory staff of the Ministry were criticised by Mr. Imbert for this careless

omission, and he commendably apologised to the public for this major inconvenience. He also stated that "it would not happen again," but did not explain how this would be ensured.

My focus today is not on allocating blame for the carelessness, but on recognising that the mistake created a serious incident, and that this incident required an emergency response strategy. The authorities apparently did not associate the situation with an emergency, and so failed to respond accordingly. I am therefore concerned that we are not ready to deal with an appropriate traffic and transport management response to a major incident.

Five weeks ago I wrote about Traffic Incident Management (TIM) as a planned and coordinated process to detect, respond to, and remove traffic incidents and restore traffic capacity as safely and quickly as possible. Among the key personnel required are the Police, and they are primarily required (depending on the type of incident) to perform primary response duties; to establish emergency access routes, and to perform traffic control. As part of this traffic control, the Police should be organised to submit up-to-date information to the media on the status of the incident, so that the media in turn could disseminate information to motorists in real time.

What would it have taken, for example, for the Assistant Commissioner of Police (Mobile), popularly known as the Traffic Chief, to give an emergency release to the radio and television houses through his communications division. The release would have identified what the problem was, and would then have appealed to motorists and commuters alike that if they could have foregone their journey to POS from the east or

south for that day that it would have been a good decision. Also, he would have advised motorists from central and south who were journeying to the east that they avoid the intersection of the Uriah Butler Highway and Churchill-Roosevelt Highway (CRH), as well as the CRH, and seek other more eastern routes. Further, he would have ensured that critical intersections were supervised by police presence, and that motor cycle police were patrolling the key routes, as the chaotic behaviour of motorists in a crisis situation is well-known.

The Traffic Chief could also have had his people communicate with B-Mobile and Digicel authorities in order to text customers, with similar information explained above. In fact, simply letting people know what the problem was would have immediately created common sense evasive ideas for themselves.

Police involved in on-site control activities must be linked by radio communications. For the Police Officers who would have taken up duty at intersections and elsewhere, they would know what each other was doing, or planning to do. It would be impossible to conduct a coordinated management of traffic flow and thus relieve congestion and gridlock quickly any other way.

Aerial monitoring of the emergency response exercise is also an important consideration, linked by radio to the on-the-ground control activities and the central authority (in this case lead by the Traffic Chief).

As it happened, no one knew exactly what was taking place (except those arriving at the site of the incident), how the response was progressing, where unnecessary blockages were occurring or where intervention could be most effectively applied to bring relief.

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