

**STATEMENT FROM THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF LABOUR TO THE
AMCHAM NATIONAL AWARDS FOR HSE EXCELLENCE 2021**

Good morning.

It is with great pleasure that I join you in celebration of AMCHAM's National Awards for HSE Excellence 2021, even as we are heading into almost two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I wish to applaud AMCHAM for its continued role in recognizing HSE Excellence and also for its commitment to host this Annual National Awards programme. I also wish to extend heartfelt gratitude to your Chamber for taking a critical leadership role, in promoting and recognizing the significance of health, safety, security and good environmental practices in Trinidad and Tobago.

As stakeholders, we must continue to recognize the hard work of all health and safety professionals, whose guidance on OSH practices is needed now more than ever. The technical guidance of OSH professionals continues to keep us safe in our various industries and workplaces on a daily basis.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are living in challenging times. At international, regional and local levels, organizations tasked with managing health and safety have mobilized their resources to formulate and implement policies, geared towards preserving the lives of their citizens. In addition, the technical and practical input of health and safety professionals have led to the updating of legislation, creation of training materials, risk assessment

tools, standard operating procedures, action frameworks and return-to work guidelines and much more.

The International Labour Organization estimates that every day, 6,300 people die as a result of occupational accidents or work-related diseases, which represents 2.3 million deaths per year. According to the ILO, there are approximately 317 million accidents at workplaces on an annual basis, with many of these accidents resulting in extended absences from work. Additionally and according to ILO's 2016 data, the human cost of these daily accidents are vast and the economic burden of poor occupational safety and health practices is estimated at 4 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product each year.

Here in Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of Labour is steadfastly working to ensure a continuous reduction in the number of local accidents in workplaces.

The Occupational Safety and Health Authority has adopted a Plan, Do, Check, and Act approach to promote and encourage safety and health of all workers in various sectors across Trinidad and Tobago.

With this approach, as Minister, I intend to ensure that a robust legislative agenda is implemented in the area of occupational health and safety. This has been made easy by the sterling work done by the OSHA in its recommended amendments of the OSH Act. Further information of the rollout of this plan shall be revealed to you, our valued stakeholders, in the coming months.

Since the proclamation of the OSH Act in 2006, there have been many developments in the labour sector which demand a legislative response, whether it be through the updating of a provision under the current Act or the introduction of new provisions. The consultative process is therefore geared at focusing on such areas and facilitating feedback from all affected sectors. It is therefore hoped that the revised Act will, for as much as it is reasonably possible, protect the interest of all stakeholders and redound in greater levels of compliance with the OSH Act.

As stated previously, through our consultations held in Trinidad and in Tobago, the Ministry brought together stakeholders from a broad spectrum of sectors including agriculture, construction, government, energy, services and manufacturing, and they all advanced several recommendations which are currently under consideration.

The Ministry of Labour is paying attention to its stakeholders and values all the input that you continue to provide to us. The Ministry remains committed to working with all our partners to achieve high productivity, growth and improved competitive capacity but we will not and must not achieve this by compromising worker safety and security and health.

Strengthening the OSH Authority to respond to the dynamic workplace environment is a main priority and this multi-stakeholder advisory body will continue to monitor the enforcement of the provisions of the OSH Act, promote training, carry out research, disseminate information on the Act

and recommend to the Minister of Labour the making of appropriate regulations changes under the OSH Act.

The OSH Agency has taken the initial steps to develop a draft National OSH Policy, which is being considered by the OSH Authority. The next step in establishing this national policy is to ensure that the legislative framework is responsive and well-suited to our needs. This would involve ensuring that the enforcement mechanisms – in this case the OSH Agency, is properly equipped to execute its mandate. This is also a priority area as the general cry from the public is that enforcement in many sectors seem to be lacking. It is also projected that after the successful conclusion of the Amendment to the OSH Act project, which hopefully will see a revised OSH Act next year, there will be the need for the development of regulations. OSHA has already prioritized the need for the development of the much needed regulations. Policy documents in various stages of review, have already been developed for the following:

- Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations (“LOLER”);
- Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (“PUWER”);
- Safety of Pressure Systems Regulations;
- Blasting and Use of Explosives Regulations
- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (“COSHH”)
- Gas Safety Use and Conveyance Regulations
- Welfare Regulations
- Personal Protective Equipment Regulations (“PPE”)

I commit to all of you here today that we are going to shape and develop an occupational safety and health culture for Trinidad and Tobago that will be emulated by others.

Within this culture, the Ministry will continue to be guided by the tenets of the International Labour Organization and their concept of decent work which speaks to:

- Productive and freely chosen work
- Rights at work
- Social protection and
- Social dialogue

In this way we shall highlight national conditions and practice, and in consultation with representatives of employers and employees, formulate, implement and periodically review a coherent national policy on occupational safety, occupational health and the working environment. The aim of the policy shall be to prevent accidents and injury to health occurring in the course of work, by minimizing, as far as possible, the causes of hazards inherent in the working environment. To achieve this OSHA is going to need additional resources.

I shall ensure that OSHA is sufficiently resourced to enable them to execute their statutory mandate of securing all workers in Trinidad and Tobago against workplace accidents and injuries. This includes increasing the staffing levels in the Agency to an acceptable standard – something that has not been achieved since its inception in 2007. If nothing else, the last eighteen (18) months has shown us the great importance of investing in

occupational safety and health and the development of resilient OSH systems of work.

The OSH Authority and Agency has signalled their intention to not just amend the Act, but to also ensure the observance of best practice throughout Trinidad and Tobago. In support of this effort, I am pleased to announce that I intend to champion efforts to increase the historically low fines in the OSH Act. This will act as a disincentive to employers who are intent on maintaining poor quality workplaces that are prone to accidents and who choose to negligently breach the law, by not providing safe and healthy workplaces.

My Government will do all within its power to ensure that the working environment in Trinidad and Tobago is safe, healthy and sustainable. We have established mechanisms to ensure that there is multi-stakeholder approach to best practice of safety and health in the workplace. The OSH Agency and by extension the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (GORTT) is the number one advocate of safety and health in Trinidad and Tobago and should stand as the flagship for the rest of the Caribbean.

As you can see, we have adopted the Demming or Shewart Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle as one of our tools of choice . For too long, we have paid only lip-service to occupational safety and health in Trinidad and Tobago and this can change now with all stakeholders playing their part. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that excellence in occupational safety and health and public health is crucial to keeping both lives and livelihoods alive and well.

At the Ministry, our vision is to reduce occupational fatalities and injuries and I intend to hold fast to this vision while I am in office. It is certainly my

hope that public and private sector employers, employees and unions, will embrace this vision for only through tripartite partnership will we achieve our goal of getting as close to zero occupational accidents, injuries and deaths as humanly possible.

However, I know that I am preaching to the proverbial choir as AMCHAM has already embraced these 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' quality concepts and has this year introduced within your safety awards, the following:

- Excellent HSE Performance
- Most Improved HSE Performance
- Outstanding HSE Project and
- Business Continuity and Surviving the Pandemic categories.

Health, safety, security and environment issues are of great importance to government, employers and workers and I reiterate that to create the paradigm shift for HSSE excellence, it requires us to move in a preventative and proactive manner.

AMCHAM has been in the business of charting the course of HSSE locally for the past 20 years and I commend you on this effort to improve standards and practices in the country. The government has provided the regulatory and legislative framework whilst constantly reviewing the process. Our worker organisations have been vigilant watchdogs to ensure worker safety and environmental protection, but I say to you that more needs to be done so as to build upon the successes attained to date.

I congratulate all of you for continuing over the years to holding high the HSE banner and to using continuous quality improvement initiatives to getting to increasingly higher levels of quality performance. Special commendation must be paid to those who have been adjudged winners in the various categories and may your great achievement serve as the new level of expected quality, upon which we all must build to achieve greater levels of productivity. Thank you AMCHAM for inviting me to speak at the National HSE Awards 2021 and wishing you and those you love a healthy 2021 and a healthier and safer 2022 to come.

In closing, we at the Ministry remain committed to the improvement of health, safety, security and environmental standards and recognize that in today's constantly changing world, we must collectively strive towards the creation of an HSSE culture that will benefit all.

I thank you.

END