



Ministry of Labour & Social Security

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STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT
ON THE OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME
TUESDAY, JUNE 23, 2015

Mr. Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to address this Honourable House, once again, on the nation's flagship Overseas Employment Programme, in particular, the pre-selection exercise planned by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security for the Canadian Farm Work Programme to be held between August 10 -28, 2015.

NEW DIRECTION

I propose to execute my address this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, within the context of the new thrust of the Ministry as was enunciated by me in my Sectoral Presentation in April of this year.

You will recall, Mr. Speaker, that I said then, going forward, it will not be prudent to view the Ministry of Labour and Social Security under my policy leadership solely as the "Farm Worker Ministry" on account of our on-going sterling effort to put labour market intelligence – driven by data, evidence, and strategic thinking - at the centre of our endeavours to place our human resource of varying skills-set at the cutting edge of prevailing global employment opportunities.

As I speak, Mr. Speaker, such overseas employment opportunities beckon to us in non-traditional farming areas of North America and Canada, and my team and I within the Ministry are seriously assessing our options with a view to entering into protracted negotiations with existing and new employers for the further growth and expansion of the Programme.

So, against this background, Mr. Speaker, my purpose this afternoon is to respectfully advise the members of this Honourable House that beginning on August 10 of this year, recruiting teams from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security will be travelling to **four (4) strategic locations** throughout the island to conduct interviews of candidates selected from several parishes at one location. For example, Mr. Speaker, interviews for Mandeville, St. Elizabeth and Clarendon, will take place in Mandeville, and so on.

What this means in essence, Mr. Speaker and colleagues, is that the Ministry will be going island-wide to pre-select persons who will be suitable to work under the Canadian Overseas Employment Programme so that when the Canadian employers submit requests for workers in the various categories a ready supply of suitable workers will be available.

SERIOUS EXERCISE

Make no mistake about it, Mr. Speaker, that this is proposed to be a serious exercise. As such, it is critical that the most suitable candidates be selected for participation in this process.

In light of this, let me spare a moment, therefore, and briefly explain to this Honourable House and, by extension, the nation, why this is of extreme importance.

First of all, this Honourable House needs to know that persons who are interested in participating in this component of the programme must of necessity have farming experience.

Secondly, it would be to such persons' advantage if they have received formal training in this field from one of our established agricultural training institutions. This would greatly increase their chances of obtaining the necessary visa from the Canadian High Commission to travel to Canada and participate in the Programme.

Given this, it is incumbent upon me to use this opportunity to encourage possible future candidates, in the gentlest way, to prepare themselves by engaging in some form of training that could prove to be beneficial in the near future in so far as their desire to participate in the Programme is concerned.

Conversely, Mr. Speaker, it must be said clearly that persons who do not have the requisite farming experience – whether formally or informally – are not suitable candidates for this aspect of the programme; and application forms should therefore not be distributed to them for it is highly unlikely that such persons will be granted a visa to travel to Canada under the Programme.

In other words, Mr. Speaker, only the best candidates will stand the best chance of being successful.

INTEGRITY OF THE PROGRAMME

Mr. Speaker, this Government has a responsibility to do everything possible to preserve the integrity of this employment-generating programme whose contribution to the social and economic development of Jamaica for more than 60 years cannot be over-emphasised or taken for granted.

In general, the Overseas Employment Programme, historically at the national level, assists in absorbing our surplus labour, particularly in the rural parts of the country.

We note, for example, Mr. Speaker, that in the 2014/2015 fiscal year alone, more than 14,000 workers travelled overseas to take up employment opportunities.

What is more, through this channel, the Programme assists in seeing to the basic needs of literally thousands of Jamaican families through improved access to education, better housing, healthcare, and other amenities.

The economy, in turn, is positively impacted by this Programme through the inflow of remittances which goes a far way in assisting to stabilize the foreign exchange market.

During the Financial Year (FY) previously mentioned, for instance, some Cdn\$17 million were remitted under the Programme.

Other benefits to the country include –

- Technology transfer through the adoption of more modern farming techniques
- Improved productivity
- Higher levels of savings
- Increased macro-economic stability
- Higher levels of entrepreneurship
- Reduced levels of poverty and social inequality.

CHALLENGES

But, Mr. Speaker, despite these benefits to the country, the Programme is not without its challenges - and in the interest of time I will here dwell briefly on only two such challenges.

The first challenge faced by the Programme has to do with the **strain on family relationships** by the temporary movement overseas of one or more family members.

In face of this problem, however, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has sought to mitigate the negative effects of these circumstances through the implementation of a functionally integrated Family Services Programme which draws on the expertise of professional social workers who provide support for the families of workers who are participating in the programme.

These social workers operate primarily, Mr. Speaker, by investigating and responding to complaints from families here at home who are unable to cope with the separation of relatives and spouses, or, worse yet, who have been neglected.

Happily, Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that since its formation, the Family Services Unit has had great success in ensuring that breadwinners in the Programme remain in contact with their families, and, most importantly, provide financial support to them.

The second challenge, Mr. Speaker, has to do with the **number of persons who go AWOL, or absent without leave.**

Truth be told, this continues to pose a major problem for us within the Ministry. But, largely because of this problem, we have been forced to take measures to rigorously improve exponentially our recruitment, orientation, and selection processes. And we have undertaken to doing so without apology to anyone, group or institution. As I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, the integrity of the Programme must be safeguarded at all cost.

THE CANADIAN OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME

Mr. Speaker, for purposes of public awareness, permit me to say a few chosen words specifically about the Canadian Overseas Employment Programme.

As most members of this Honourable House are reasonably aware, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security administers four (4) overseas employment programmes, namely:

- The United States Farm Work Programme
- The United States Hospitality Programme
- The Guantanamo Bay Programme
- The Canadian Farm and Factory Programme.

Jamaican workers are gainfully engaged in several sectors under these programmes, such as:

- Hospitality and Tourism
- Agriculture
- Fishing
- Transportation
- Healthcare

The **United States Farm Work (or H2A)** Programme allows for the temporary admission of Jamaican workers to the USA to perform agricultural work of a seasonal nature provided that US citizens are not available, while the **United States Hospitality Programme** caters to Jamaicans with qualifications and expertise in the hotel sector.

The **Guantanamo Bay Recruitment Programme**, Mr. Speaker, which began in 1962, caters to the demand for skilled and unskilled workers at the US Naval Station in Cuba. To date, over 1,000 Jamaicans are employed on the Base as carpenters, cooks, electricians, drivers, firemen, food service workers, etc.

Mr. Speaker, for its part, the **Canadian Overseas Employment Programme** operates in two streams, that is –

- The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme (SAWP)
- The Low Skill Programme

Mr. Speaker, this programme is some 49 years old and, under it, the term “Low Skill” encompasses all the other groups of unskilled workers who travel to Canada to work but who are not covered under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme.

In furthering the process of public awareness, Mr. Speaker, it should be noted that skills categorized under the term “Low Skill” include:

- Agricultural Workers
- Hospitality and Fast Food Workers
- Laundry and Janitorial Workers
- Some of the categories of construction workers, and
- Factory Workers – such as those who work in food packaging

DISTRIBUTION OF THE APPLICATION FORMS

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture, I am pleased to announce that this afternoon, Members of this Honourable House will be receiving their quota of application forms for the Canadian Overseas Employment Programme to be distributed to suitable candidates in their respective constituencies.

Mr. Speaker, let me state categorically that the forms should only be distributed to persons who satisfy the following criteria:-

Persons must –

- Be between the ages of 21-45
- Have farming experience
- Possess a certified copy of their birth certificate
- Be literate
- Be of good character and in good health
- Must not have been previously disqualified from any Overseas Employment Programme due to medical or any other reason
- Possess a valid Jamaican passport (the burgundy one) or a CARICOM passport (the navy blue one)
- Not have a criminal record
- Not have been deported from any country.

Mr. Speaker, let me go further and state that it is of absolute importance that the forms not be reproduced either through photocopying, computer generation or any other means. Any such forms will be disqualified!

And under no circumstances, Mr. Speaker, must the forms be sold!

Any attempt to do this, Mr. Speaker, will carry criminal sanction. Let those who have ears to hear not only hear me; but be wise and take heed as well.

RURAL vs. URBAN CONSTITUENCIES

Mr. Speaker, it is important to note that the allocation of the forms to Members of Parliament (MPs) this afternoon is based on whether their respective constituencies are located in the rural or urban areas of Jamaica.

In simple terms, those MPs whose constituencies are located in the rural areas of the island can be expected to receive a larger allocation of application forms in view of the fact that we are aiming for candidates with farming experience of one sort or the other.

Over and against this, Mr. Speaker, I wish to say that there really is no need for any controversy about the recruitment process on the basis of the allocation of the forms.

I say this, Mr. Speaker, because on every occasion that we plan for a recruitment exercise, a finite number of application forms are prepared by the Ministry. This means that the number of forms is always limited as this depends on the number of persons actually targeted for recruitment.

In any event, Mr. Speaker, individuals wishing to participate in the Programme always have the option of interacting directly with the Ministry or visiting their respective parish offices to indicate their interest.

Mr. Speaker, although historically, MPs play an integral role in the distribution of application forms, the fact is that leaders of civic organizations, such as trade unions and employers' organizations, the Church and other social groups, also play an indispensable role in the process.

RETURN OF THE FORMS

In the final analysis, Mr. Speaker, the application forms should be completed by the candidates and returned to their Member of Parliament accompanied by a passport-sized photograph and a character reference from either a Justice of the Peace or a security officer.

Most important, Mr. Speaker, the forms must be returned by the Member of Parliament to the Ministry by July 10, 2015. Thereafter, they will be processed and the names of all candidates compiled on a master list by constituency and parish.

Mr. Speaker, members of this Honourable House and the wider public need to know that with respect to the Canadian Overseas Employment Programme, the High Commission of Canada no longer requires a fingerprint check from the Ministry for selected candidates.

Instead, Mr. Speaker, a police certificate from the Technical Services Division of the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) is now requested.

This document is to be submitted when the successful candidates are called in to commence preparation for travel and to complete a medical examination.

SELECTION OF WORKERS FROM THE "POOL"

In bringing my presentation to a close, Mr. Speaker, I wish to clarify the spectre of misunderstanding surrounding the issue of how workers are selected during the recruitment drive process.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that approximately 85% of the workers who participate in the Overseas Employment Programme are known as "**requested workers**".

This means that they had travelled to work overseas under the Programme before and were requested to return by their respective employers. The other 15%, Mr. Speaker, are new workers to the Programme, who ultimately are selected from the "pool".

From a total of 3,000 persons who were selected during the recruitment drive in July 2014, Mr. Speaker, only some 1,400 persons remain in the pool for which preparation is being made for them to travel during the 2016 Season.

Given this, Members of Parliament are being advised that they can call the Ministry to request an update on the status of persons who were selected from their constituencies because we maintain a database where the progress of selectees are tracked and recorded.

CLOSING

Mr. Speaker, in bringing my presentation to a close I wish on behalf of the Government and people of Jamaica to thank most sincerely our main partners in this highly prized venture - the High Commission of Canada and the United States Embassy.

They have provided the Jamaican people participating in the Overseas Employment Programme over these many decades with a tremendous level of professional and dedicated service to facilitate the timely dispatch of workers, for which we as a Government are eternally grateful.

I, therefore, give the undertaking this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, that the Ministry of Labour and Social Security is committed to working assiduously with both the Canadian High Commission and the United States Embassy, the overseas employers and the Liaison Services in the United States and Canada, in ensuring that together we continue to operate at the standard, and at the level required to maintain the integrity and efficiency of one of the greatest partnerships to have emerged in the past 50 years between Jamaica and Canada and the United States of America.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.