

## **THE ODPM's RESPONSE TO TROPICAL WAVE INVEST 91L**

### **Introduction**

Annually, as the hurricane season comes around and the dry season changes to the wet, the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management (ODPM) has come to expect the re-emergence of one or two self-appointed 'disaster experts', making baseless criticisms having done no research.

While the ODPM does not mind being criticised, it expects at the very least, these critics would have conducted their research and not choose to publish as fact, inaccurate and unsubstantiated statements. The ODPM remains available to assist in this regard, for we prefer to assist persons fill in the blanks where they exist, rather than make erroneous statements, which only serve to cause irreparable damage to the organisation's reputation.

### **Purpose**

This article aims first, to refute similar baseless statements and innuendos that were made in an opinion-piece published in the October 8, 2022 Saturday Guardian under the heading "Waiting for the ODPM". In that article, the writer attempted to present as fact, his/her perceptions of what the ODPM's role ought to have been, during and following the passage of tropical wave Invest 91L.

However, the main purpose of this article, is to provide the reader with an insight into the ODPM's operations and how, working in tandem with other agencies, an integrated approach was taken to manage the response effort and bring relief to citizens.

### **Disaster 'Experts' and Tunnelled-Vision**

The passage of Invest 91L resulted in flooding and landslides mainly in three (3) of the 14 Municipal Corporations - Tunapuna-Piarco, Sangre Grande and Chaguanas - and in seven (7) communities of Tobago.

Being a localised event, in Trinidad, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government (MRDLG) would have been responsible for responding to the deluge, while in Tobago, responsibility would have fallen to the Tobago House of Assembly (THA).

Finding this approach inadequate, the 'expert's' innovative solution for managing the complexities involved in last week's crisis lay in one (1) principal strategy. The deployment of all the ODPM's staff into the field to provide "boots on the ground", so that they would be working "shoulder-to-shoulder with regional corporations (sic) employees".

Consequently, with its current staff complement of 30-odd persons, the ODPM would have provided the magic bullet, which would have relieved our citizens of their distress in the fastest possible way. This, despite the combined strength of the 14 Municipal Corporations and the THA numbering in the thousands. However, this will be further elaborated upon later in the article.

Of course, this overly simplistic solution if followed had severe implications for the nation. First, from an operational perspective, the National Disaster Office would have abandoned all of its ongoing national and regional responsibilities. Second, no consideration would have been given to the ODPM's responsibility for coordinating the activities of the response and support agencies. Neither it seems that any thought was given to the office's data collection and analytical capabilities, nor its ability to generate and share solutions with agencies. This was particularly critical, given the uncertain and dynamic situation the country was facing at the time.

Strategically, it seems that our tunnelled-vision ‘expert’ also did not give any consideration whatsoever for the ODPM to maintain its responsibility of scoping the landscape for associated cascading effects, nor emerging threats to the nation.

Also of significance is Trinidad and Tobago’s regional responsibility. As the Southern Sub-regional Focal Point, through the ODPM, this country always must be monitoring and ready to generate disaster relief for Grenada, Guyana and Suriname, in the event they become overwhelmed by a hazard event. Coincidentally, the weather system after passing our country, further strengthened, posing greater challenges to Guyana and Suriname, and eventually becoming Tropical Storm Julia.

### **Uninformed Criticisms**

The writer linked his recommendations to rather unfortunate statements expressed that week by the MP for Barataria-San Juan, the Honourable Saddam Hosein. The MP, in his statement carried on national television, alluded that the ODPM and not the local authorities, was the entity that was responsible for managing the flood response. As such, he felt it should not have been allocated any money in the national budget.

The MP’s view of the locus of control for managing a Level 1 response clearly contradicts with international best practice. Such approaches always encourage that national and international resources should be employed in support of local authorities. Naturally, this is because the local authorities better than anyone else, know ‘the lay of the land’ and its idiosyncrasies.

Perhaps the MP could be forgiven as his utterances occurred in the ‘heat’ of an exchange between him and the Minister of National Security, the Honourable Fitzgerald Hinds. The Minister, as the office holder with responsibility for the ODPM, wasted no time however, to educate his Parliamentary colleague of the ODPM’s coordinating role in such circumstances. Unfortunately, this part of the exchange was not given similar coverage.

### **Misrepresentation and Propaganda**

On the other hand, probably the writer knew better than the MP, and with malicious intent, purposely misrepresented the truth and aimed to mislead the public, by giving the false impression that the ODPM did not show up, and hence the title of the opinion-piece. What a low, despicable attempt to tarnish the ODPM’s name. Nothing could be further from the truth!

While the ODPM neither has the time nor the resources to respond every time such commentators reappear, on this occasion however when such a blatant attempt at misinformation is being made, it must sacrifice and find the time to address these inaccuracies. The organisation is only too mindful of the statement attributed to the Nazi propagandist Joseph Gobbels, who it is claimed said “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.”

Time and space however do not permit any further elaboration of the writer’s contemptible effort and now the article must shift its focus to provide the readership with the context that shaped our response. Also, it provides a brief summary of our actions working alongside the other agencies prior to, during and after the 3-day event.

## The National Response Framework

The disaster management community in Trinidad and Tobago acts in accordance with the protocols established by the National Response Framework. This system organises responses on a tiered basis ranging from Levels 1-3, depending on the actual or anticipated severity of an event.

Last week, when the TTMS issued an adverse weather, Yellow Level Alert, anyone with some experience in disaster operations, would have known that the situation was going to be approached as a Level 1 response. Practitioners also would have known that this approach would be maintained, unless the TTMS changed the alert levels to orange or red, which would have triggered a corresponding change in the response levels. In such situations, the ODPM's posture also would change and it would activate the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC). Here, it is important to note that at no point throughout the 3-day event, did the TTMS see the necessity to raise the adverse weather alert level beyond yellow. The only increase in the alert levels was for a riverine flood alert after the passage of the system.

### Level 1 Response – Assets Availability

At a Level 1 response, the assets and personnel employed by the local disaster response bodies i.e. the Disaster Management Units of the MRDLG and the Tobago Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) (the latter supported by the Division of Infrastructure, Quarries and Urban Development), are anticipated to be sufficient to manage an emerging threat(s).

When combined, these agencies' capacities include organic assets, CEPEP, URP and the Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). In addition to these are the area Fire and Police Services' elements and if necessary, persons from the National Reforestation Programme. Yet still, using the All-of-Corporations/TEMA concept, additional resources could be sourced from Corporations/communities that have not experienced any or inconsequential impacts. Should all these resources become exhausted, also available are the ODPM, Red Cross and NGO's Volunteers. Finally, and even before transitioning to a Level 2/3 response, the T&T Defence Force's (TTDF's) Engineer Battalion makes available, a small cadre of troops (note this is before the TTDF's full might is brought to bear on a situation, which occurs at Level 2 and 3). The system therefore is a scaleable one.

In light of the existence of these assets at the local level, quite rightly, the response in Trinidad was led by the Disaster Management Units of the MRDLG, and in Tobago, by the THA's TEMA.



*ODPM personnel loading a pallet of hoses at the National Disaster Stores to support ongoing response and recovery efforts on the island of Tobago.*



*The 1st Engineer Battalion providing assistance to the Ministry of Works and Transport in clearing landslides on the Aripo Road, Sangre Grande.*

These SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) are well-established and practised by the various national response agencies.

### **The ODPM – Coordination**

Simultaneously, while arrangements are being made at the local level, the ODPM, as the National Disaster Office, is managing its responsibilities at the local, national and regional levels.

Depending on the anticipated severity of a threat, the ODPM would take on a role similar to a maestro conducting an orchestra, creating synergy and harmony amongst the various players. This was the case last week while planning for Invest 91L. Despite being categorised as a Yellow Level Alert, because of its sheer size, forecasted precipitation and wind gusts, the ODPM took the initiative to convene the multi-agency coordinating group, to prepare for the incoming system.

Hence, as is common practise, the ODPM arranged with the TTMS for the participants to be briefed about the impending threat and established a platform for information sharing and reporting on states of readiness, concerns, etc.

On Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2022, three (3) days before the passage of the tropical wave, the ODPM held the first multi-agency coordinating meeting, which was attended by over 20 national agencies.

Preceding this meeting, were a series of bilateral meetings, held with the TTMS and some of the key response agencies. Additionally, the ODPM held two other coordinating meetings, spanning the period of the system's passage. These meetings allowed agencies to share information on impacts, assessments, support provided to citizens and future plans and actions.



*The ODPM coordinating the packing and delivery of relief and recovery items for the island of Tobago.*

## The ODPM – Invest 91 L Operations

In addition to these meetings, during the 3-day period, the ODPM undertook several other missions. These activities included but were not limited to: deployment of reconnaissance teams to conduct on-site assessments at key locations along the Caroni River and other waterways, which aided flood response and the TTMS' issuance of riverine flood alerts; deployment of high-water vehicles in support of operations within impacted Corporations; coordination with the Engineer



*The ODPM supporting the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and SEWATT flood response initiative by providing meals to families affected by flooding in Valsayn South.*

Battalion for troops to be deployed to Cumaca to conduct landslide clearance operations and sandbagging support to residents of Real Spring Housing Development; collaboration with the T&T Fire Service for its Search and Rescue team to be deployed to rescue/recover the late Theresa Layne (may she R.I.P.); coordination with the NGO, SEWATT for ready-to-eat meals to be provided to impacted families and response personnel deployed in the field; attendance at TEMA's meetings for coordinating Tobago's response and dispatch of additional supplies to Tobago to support response operations; provision of similar support to response agencies

in Trinidad; keeping national decision-makers, response agencies; the media and the public apprised about the adverse weather and its effects, and provision of information on initiatives being undertaken and recommended safety measures; and flood mitigation assessments to capture and share data with government agencies responsible for immediate and long-term flood alleviation measures.

### Value Added

It should be pretty obvious by now that these roles performed by the ODPM would have added immense value to the combined efforts of all the response and support agencies. By extension, the ODPM's actions would have been an enabler to speedier efforts to relieve the discomfort and disruption our citizens' experienced.



*The Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force and HDC Personnel deploying sandbags in the Real Spring Housing Development, Valsayn South.*

On the contrary, had the office operated as the ‘expert’ advised, there would have been a monumental gap in our country’s disaster response to Invest 91L. Worse, had there been rapid escalation beyond a Yellow Level Alert and the trailing rainfall resulted in more extensive damage, then the ODPM with all its “boots” in the fields, would have been pigeon-holed and at pains to respond.

## **Conclusion**

Trinidad and Tobago’s Disaster Response Framework mirrors international best practice. Like any other country, it is not perfect, but it provides a realistic guide for both the disaster management community and the wider national community, to respond to a multiplicity of hazards.

The ODPM hopes that this article helps the national community and in particular, assists our ‘disaster experts’ to become more cognisant of the critical role the ODPM plays, even at a local level of response. Additionally, it hopes persons are better able to appreciate that a high performance organisation always must be ready, should the situation ever escalate to a national or a regional response.

Simultaneously, even when responding to disruptive situations, the ODPM also has to remain focused on its other ongoing responsibilities such as national disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness, recovery, rehabilitation and capacity building.

In the case of the latter, to his/her credit, the writer acknowledged the ODPM’s efforts at public education and information dissemination. Hopefully, this article further adds to his/her knowledge. In this regard, the ODPM extends an invitation to the writer and the Honourable Saddam Hosein, M.P., for them to visit our office for an information exchange session. We are confident that together, we can make our country a more resilient and sustainable nation.