

Business groups back move...

CAL tests digital entry form

✉ **Vishanna Phagoo**

PASSENGERS on three flights operated by national carrier Caribbean Airlines (CAL) from tomorrow will be required to complete the T&T Digital Arrival/ Departure Form as authorities test the online platform.

The test flights are BW 527 from Guyana, BW 431 from Grenada, and BW 240, which is scheduled to depart for Grenada.

The online card system was officially launched on Wednesday as part of efforts to modernise the immigration and customs process.

The digital system, which will replace the country's traditional paper-based immigration forms, is scheduled to take effect on March 17.

'The link will be accessible from March 14 and passengers on these test flights are to complete their AD forms on the date of travel,' Caribbean Airlines stated on its Facebook page yesterday.

Business groups yesterday expressed support for the digital travel card system.

Meanwhile, Ramesh Lutchmedial, the retired director general of Civil Aviation at Trinidad and Tobago Civil Aviation Authority, described the move as a 'step in the right direction.'

Efficiency improvement In a statement to the *Express* yesterday, the chief strategic officer of the Confederation of Regional Business Chambers Angie Jairam said this is a welcomed move.

She said the transition from paper to online would significantly improve efficiency at the nation's ports of entry.

'By allowing travellers to complete their forms electronically before arrival or departure, the system is expected to ease congestion at immigration counters and improve the overall flow of passengers,' said Jairam.

From a business perspective, she said initiatives like these contribute positively to the ease of doing business.

'Investors, business travellers and members of the diaspora benefit from systems that are efficient, predictable and aligned with international standards,' Jairam said.

She noted that CRBC's members observed improvements within customs, 'including the use of security detection dogs, which strengthens border security while maintaining operational efficiency'.

Jairam said while the initiative was commendable, the CRBC recognised that there may be some initial teething challenges.

'Consideration should be given to travellers who may not be technologically savvy, particularly in uploading the biometric page of passports or navigating the online platform. Support services should therefore be available to assist persons who may require help,' said Jairam.

'Transparency required' Though he welcomed the long-awaited system, president of the Chaguanas Chamber of Industry and Commerce Baldath Maharaj called for transparency in the allocation of funds towards the platform.

At the launch of the platform, Minister of Homeland Security Roger Alexander declined to provide any information on how much this new initiative would cost taxpayers.

In a WhatsApp response to the *Express*, he said: 'Whilst we recognise the Government's position regarding the security sensitivities mentioned by Minister Alexander, the business community operates best in an environment of full disclosure. We believe that transparency regarding the investment of such initiatives is an important part of public trust, and we look forward to the eventual disclosure of these figures to better appreciate the value for money and long-term sustainability of the platform.'

Maharaj said he trusted the return on this investment would be seen in increased efficiency, ensuring that the project would remain a sustainable one. He also noted this could contribute to the ease of doing business. '**Seamless experience**'

'For our members, many of whom are frequent business travellers, time is a vital currency, and reduction directly translates into a more seamless experience. By replacing the traditional paper-based immigration forms, we minimise the administrative hurdles and errors often found in handwritten documents as well as storage. This digital shift signals to the international community that we are serious about updating our national operating systems and lowering the hidden costs of delays,' he said.

However, Maharaj said the success of this system depends on its ability to be truly inclusive during this transition period.

'We are encouraged by the ministry's commitment to providing on-site assistance for the less tech savvy and maintaining paper forms as a temporary contingency; however, our focus remains on the reliability of the digital backbone to ensure there is no downtime that could disrupt the flow. For a paperless system to thrive, the infrastructure must be strong enough to handle high traffic from the moment it goes live on March 17,' he urged. Maharaj said the business community saw this as an opportunity to build a more connected and efficient gateway, provided the implementation remained as strong as the vision itself.

'Ultimately, the Chamber views this initiative as long overdue and a significant step toward transforming our nation into a modern commercial hub. The shift away from manual, paper-based applications is not just about convenience; it is the progress we have been hoping for and sets a strong precedent for future technological adoptions across other government sectors,' he said.

Maharaj added that the Chamber is optimistic that this digital platform would serve as a catalyst for a more productive economy.

'We encourage all members of the Chaguanas business community to familiarise themselves with the new portal starting March 14 to ensure a smooth transition into this new era of travel,' he added.

President of the San Fernando Business Association Daphne Bartlett said she was happy with this development and said it 'would certainly speed up the process of clearance with immigration'.

Asked if she was concerned by the cost of this development not being shared by the relevant ministers at the launch on Wednesday, she said, 'The price should not be exorbitant since it is done globally. We worry about cost a little too much.'

Bartlett also noted the concern people had for the photo identification requirement.

'One concern few people have is-why is there a need for a picture to be uploaded? They suggested that it might be tedious for the elderly. I guess these people could have the option of a paper trail,' she said.

Lutchmedial described the platform as a 'step in the right direction' and noted that passengers would no longer have the inconvenience of filling out a paper form in the aircraft, where space is limited most times.

He said, 'You don't need a pen. You can do it online at home before you travel, so it's a lot more convenient for the passengers.'

Lutchmedial also called on the Government to consider the use of electronic passports.

-with reporting by Sherlan Ramsubhag