

## Tobago faces supply shortages amid cargo shipping disruptions

■ **Elizabeth Williams**

A SUPPLY shortage is emerging in Tobago amid the absence of an operational cargo vessel to supply the sister island.

The *Express* visited several supermarkets and hardware stores across Tobago yesterday and observed shortages of key supplies, with cement notably unavailable at a number of outlets. One businessman said he had implemented reduced working hours for staff in an effort to avoid layoffs.

Chairman of the Tobago arm of the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce Curtis Williams says developments affecting the inter-island sea bridge are cause for serious concern, coupled with a shortage of space on existing vessels to transport cargo between Trinidad and Tobago.

'The *Galleons Passage* cannot bring the cargo that is needed on the island, so it leaves the construction sector, it leaves the food and beverage sector, it leaves other sectors in real challenges. Those folks in scrap iron-they can't even move their scrap iron from point A to point B; those that need cement for construction... they just can't get it, they are not getting the bulk cement they accustomed getting,' Williams told the *Express*.

Almandoz Hardware, Belfon Hardware, Richard Hardware and Singh's Hardware have all indicated that cement is currently unavailable, with additional shortages reported in sand, steel, lumber and concrete blocks.

Meanwhile, some empty shelves were also observed at the PennySavers supermarket in Carnbee. Williams said two cargo vessels are required to adequately service the inter-island seabridge.

He noted that this recommendation was made last year during a high-level meeting involving Minister of Works and Infrastructure Jearlean John, THA Chief Secretary Farley Augustine and officials of the Port Authority.

'One of the measures we indicated to them is to have two cargo vessels-two smaller cargo vessels-that could reach the demand of the island, and they interchange; because when one vessel has to go on dry dock, wet dock, or when one vessel breaks down for any unforeseen circumstances, we would still have a vessel moving the cargo between the two islands.'

He warned that prices in Tobago are expected to increase in the near future.

'We are the ones seeing the mini-marts complaining that liquor licence move from \$1,800-\$9,000; and then gas-the natural gas-is going up to feed all these manufacturers; so you know prices is going to go up in Tobago.'

### **Ongoing work on vessels**

In response to these developments, Minister of Works and Infrastructure Jearlean John said welding of the damaged *Blue Wave Harmony* vessel started on Sunday.

'We are very big on safety of the boat and ultimately passengers, so we sent people over since Friday to start that welding; but that did not start until Sunday because of the preliminary work that had to take place,' John said.

She said efforts were being made to have the *MV Blue Wave Harmony* in operation before the end of the week.



**EXTREME SHORTAGES:** There is a lack of lumber, cement, sand, and a shortage of steel at Almandoz Hardware in Scarborough Tobago.