

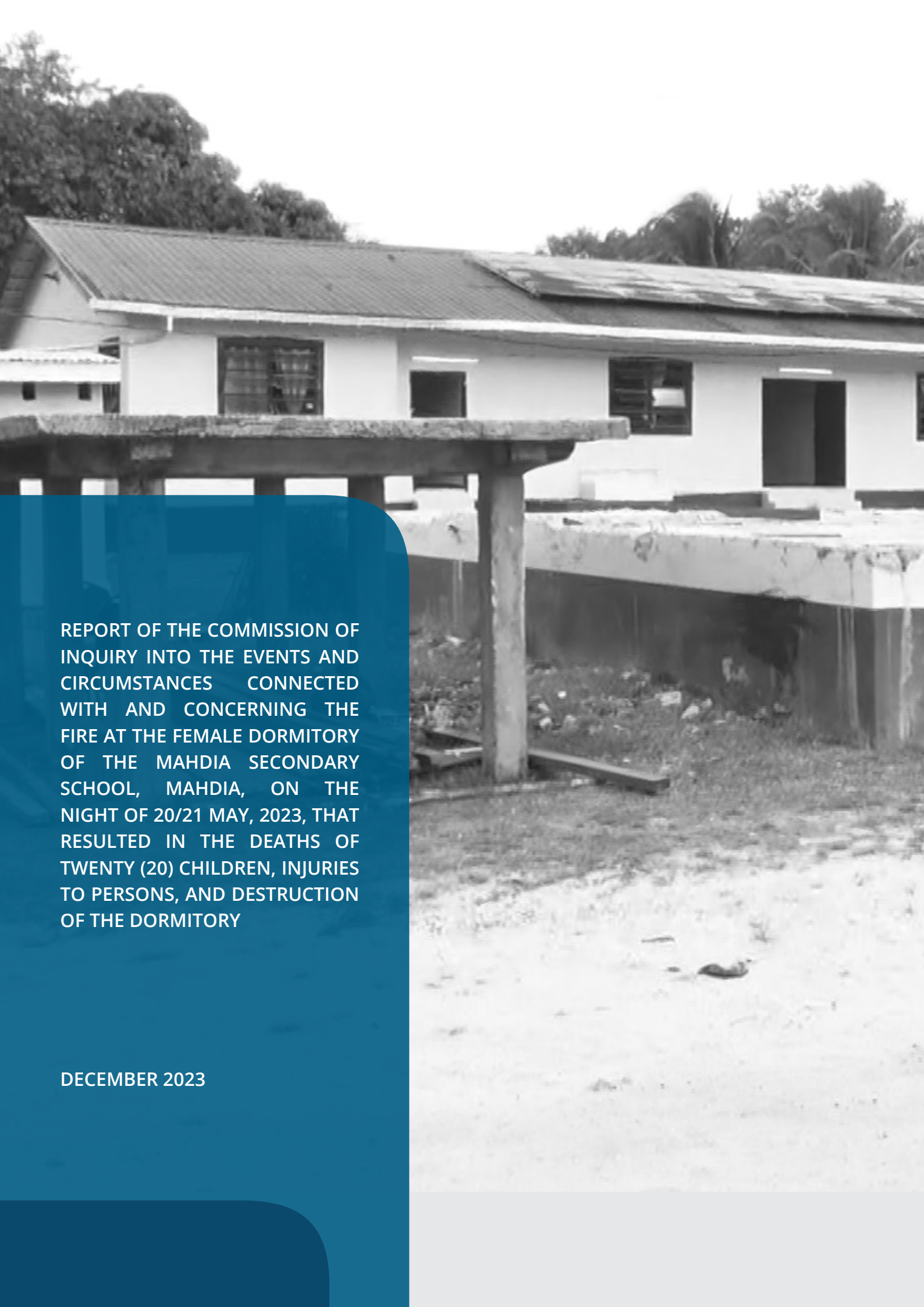
# Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Mahdia Secondary School Female Dormitory Fire

JANUARY 2024

BRAZIL



IRIN



REPORT OF THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE EVENTS AND CIRCUMSTANCES CONNECTED WITH AND CONCERNING THE FIRE AT THE FEMALE DORMITORY OF THE MAHDIA SECONDARY SCHOOL, MAHDIA, ON THE NIGHT OF 20/21 MAY, 2023, THAT RESULTED IN THE DEATHS OF TWENTY (20) CHILDREN, INJURIES TO PERSONS, AND DESTRUCTION OF THE DORMITORY

DECEMBER 2023

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Map of Guyana showing distance between Mahdia and surrounding villages

# ACRONYMS

REO – Regional Executive Officer

CEO – Chief Education Officer

CFO – Chief Fire Officer

CID -Criminal Investigation Department

DCEO (Admin) - Deputy Chief Education Officer (Administration)

DREO – Deputy Regional Executive Officer

GOG – Government of Guyana

MOE – Ministry of Education

MOF – Ministry of Finance

MLGRD – Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development

MH&SS – Ministry of Human Services and Social Security

PS – Permanent Secretary

REDO – Regional Education Officer

TORs – Terms of Reference

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This Report could not have been possible without the diligent and unwavering work of essential personnel who assisted the members of the Commission throughout this inquiry and in the completion of this report. We acknowledge the diligence and dedication of Counsel to the Commission, Mr. Keoma D. Griffith, and Secretary to the Commission, Mr. Javed Shadick for their preparation of witnesses and ensuring hearings were conducted with all efficiency. We also acknowledge the work of the Commission of Inquiry Secretariat, for without their commitment, our mandate could not be fulfilled.

We also give a special acknowledgement to all persons who came forward and willingly testified before the Commission. Their devotion and fortitude in telling the stories surrounding the tragic events of 21st May, 2023 were inspiring and heartening. A debt of gratitude is owed to these persons for their bravery.

We also extend our gratitude to the members of the Guyana Defence Force, Guyana Fire Service, Guyana Police Force and the Deputy Regional Executive Officer of Region Eight (8) who ensured our visits to Mahdia and other Amerindian Communities were productive and safe.

We thank the Hon. Mohabir Anil Nandlall SC MP, Attorney General & Minister of Legal Affairs, for his assistance in organizing the location for our hearings and ensuring that the relevant financial support was provided by the Ministry of Finance, through the Office of the President.

Finally, we thank His Excellency, the President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, and the people of Guyana, for reposing trust and confidence in us to execute the mandate contained in the terms of reference.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The events surrounding the fire which took place at the Mahdia Female Dormitory in the town of Mahdia on 21st May, 2023, were horrific and heartbreaking. It will go down in history as one of the most tragic events. A total of twenty (20) students of the Mahdia Secondary School from the communities of Chenapau, Karisparu and Micobie perished in a fire that engulfed the female dormitory, allegedly set by a single female student, who has since been charged. This tragedy has shocked the conscience of our people and has catapulted our Nation into grief.

On 10th August, 2023, we received our instruments of appointment from H.E. Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, formally appointing us as Commissioners to inquire into the events of the fire. A promise that His Excellency publicly made shortly after the horrific event. The Terms of Reference (TORs) mandated us to inquire into and report on the events and circumstances leading up to and the causes of the Mahdia dormitory fire on the night of the 20th of May 2023; inquire into and report upon the actions taken to provide swift care, medical attention, and other forms of support and assistance to the injured and their families, and to the families and relatives of the deceased; and, make such recommendations and observations as the Commission may deem fit, including such measures and actions that the Commission may consider necessary and appropriate to prevent the recurrence of such tragedy.

The work of the Commission was efficiently organized by its Secretary, Mr. Javed Shadick and a body of administrative officers under his charge. Additionally, during our hearings, the evidence before the Commission was competently led by Counsel to the Commission, Mr. Keoma D. Griffith, whose work also included gathering evidence and guiding the Commission in law and on matters pertinent to our effective management of hearings.

We began our hearings on 15th September, 2023 and concluded on 10th November, 2023, following a gracious extension of one (1) month from His Excellency. As we proceeded to execute our responsibilities, we considered it a priority to conduct the work of the Commission with all transparency, efficiency, and sensitivity required. We considered it our duty to act in the best interests of all minors affected by this tragedy and therefore ensured that all references to the deceased were dealt with in a dignified manner. We were guided by provisions of this country's Juvenile Justice Act of 2018, best practices, and international standards to ensure the interest of all minors who appeared before us was paramount. Where necessary, we also enforced the provisions of the Commissions of Inquiry Act, Chapter 19:03, which empowered us to make such rules for our own guidance and for the conduct and management of proceedings before us.

Our Commission paid two (2) visits to the town of Mahdia and visited the communities of Karisparu, Chenapau, Micobie and Campbelltown as a means of consulting with those affected, and with the Tashaos and Elders. During these visits we also inspected relevant locations and gathered evidence to assist the Commission in its work.

From 29 witnesses, 14 of whom provided written witness statements and tendered reports before us, we were able to gather sufficient, credible evidence, to ensure that our findings fulfilled our mandate as defined in the gazetted TORs.

Our Commission received evidence and expert reports regarding the investigation of the circumstances and cause of the fire. Based on the evidence, we concluded that an individual intentionally set the fire.

In summary, and notwithstanding this appalling act of arson, we determined that the events and circumstances leading up to, and the causes of the Mahdia dormitory fire were an unfortunate outcome of several factors: the influence of the mining culture on social relationships within communities; the vulnerability of youth - in particular, teenaged female students; the influence of adults in the mining sector who groom young females - in some cases with the tacit support of family members who benefit financially from such arrangements; the negligence of particular officials in fire readiness, and in the education sector and psycho-social services to deal condignly with deviant behaviour.

While our hearings uncovered several inadequacies with which the Mahdia Dormitory facility was afflicted for the purpose of fire

prevention, we found that a better-equipped facility would not have delivered a different result having regard to the cause of the fire, and the speed with which it became an inferno. The unpreparedness of the Guyana Fire Service to effectively respond to a fire of this magnitude did not help the cause. Indeed, no amount of fire prevention and fire protection measures in the dormitory, or fire emergency training and procedures would have made any substantial difference in the outcome.

We found there was a delay in contacting and/or seeking the assistance of the Mahdia Fire Station; issues such as crowd control and access to the dorm compound encountered by the Fire Service en route to the fire; inadequacies of the Mahdia Fire Service in rescue and fire-fighting equipment; and the lack of available water supply to fight the fire. These factors assisted with the speed of the conflagration that engulfed the dormitory in which the children were trapped. Despite the presence of five (5) ungrilled doors situated in the building to provide entry and exit, this failed to impact what unfolded on the evening of 21st May, 2023. Such was the magnitude and speed of the blaze. This was accompanied by the understandable human failure to access the keys in those chaotic and fiery circumstances.

We found that when the Fire Service arrived at the fire to provide a response, the female dormitory was already consumed by fire and even in the absence of the issues identified above, very little more could have been done to produce a different outcome. This is due to the late stage at which the Fire Service was contacted and dispatched to respond to the fire.



We are satisfied that when word of the fire was communicated to the officials at Mahdia and Georgetown, there was a rapid mobilisation of resources coupled with instant responsiveness. The courage and commitment of the aviation services, medical staff, volunteers at Mahdia, Georgetown, and overseas, to ensure swift movement, and access to medical treatment of the injured stand tall during this national tragedy. Moreover, the outstanding leadership of His Excellency the President Dr. Mohammed Irfan Ali in personally taking the lead in managing this national crisis was exemplary, commendable, and indeed set the tone of the response from both the private and public sector to this tragedy.

Emphasis was placed on ensuring the comfort, counselling and welfare of the injured, the relatives of the deceased and injured, and those traumatized by the event. However, as expressed by Dr. Shilindra Rajkumar in his evidence, the situation was a lot more than these medical professionals were accustomed to or were prepared for. Nothing could have prepared them for the magnitude of this tragedy. In fact, nothing could have prepared the nation for the magnitude of this tragedy.

Finally, the Commission hopes that the pain and grief being experienced by those who have lost their loved ones and those traumatised by the tragedy, will be constant reminders that the Commission’s recommendations in this report must be followed through assiduously to ensure that the lessons learned from this tragedy inform those actions to be taken to prevent a recurrence.

January 2024



.....  
Major General (retired)  
Joseph Govinda Singh  
Chairman



.....  
Mr Derrick Rowan John  
Chairman of the National  
Toshaos Council  
Commissioner



.....  
Dr Joycelin Kim-Kyte Thomas  
Attorney at Law  
Commissioner

*Visit by the Commission in Mahdia with parents, guardians and residents affected by fire*



# INTRODUCTION

On 21st May, 2023, Guyana, the Region and the rest of the world, were plunged into shock and mourning as news spread of one of the most tragic events befalling our nation's recent history, the result of which was the loss of lives and trauma to the town of Mahdia and other indigenous communities, and destruction of the Female Dormitory of the Mahdia Secondary School. Twenty (20) of our country's young souls were lost when the Mahdia Secondary School Female Dormitory, was completely ravished by fire. The impact of this tragedy will have a long-lasting effect on the care and welfare of children in this country.

Adonijah Jerome aged 5, Andrea Roberts aged 13, Delecia Edwards aged 15, Ariana Edwards aged 13, Mary Dandrade aged 15, Martha Dandrade aged 15, Bellnisa Evans aged 13, Sabrina John aged 16, Loreen Evans aged 14, Natalie Bellarmine aged 18, Bibi Jeffrey aged 13, Eulanda Carter aged 15, Omerfia Edwin aged 15, Lisa Roberts aged 14, Nickleen Robinson aged 13, Sherena Daniels aged 14, Cleoma Simon aged 12, Tracil Thomas aged 13, Sherena Daniels aged 14, and Lorita Williams aged 14, all lost their lives as a consequence of this tragic fire.

We, the Commissioners, and all staff under our charge hereby place on record our sincere condolences to the relatives and friends of the dear departed children and pray for their comfort as they continue to process the effects of this most sorrowful event. The impact will be everlasting in the memory and conscience of every Guyanese.



*Plot of land where The Mahdia Dormitory was situated*



*The Mahdia Dormitory Compound Foreground – Floor of the destroyed Female Dormitory, Background – The Male Dormitory; right – The Dining Hall*



*The Southern and Eastern Sides of the Mahdia Female Dormitory  
(room on left is where the Dorm Mother lived)*



*The Western Entrance to the dorm compound. Female  
Dorm's flooring is behind the Security Hut, male dorm  
on left and dining hall in background*

## TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK

### METHODOLOGY

In response to the tragedy at Mahdia, H.E. Dr. Mohamed Irfaan Ali, President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, publicly undertook to issue a Presidential Commission to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the fire. On 10th August, 2023, and by publication in the Official Gazette, His Excellency issued a Commission to inquire into and report on the events and circumstances connected with and concerning the fire at the female dormitory of the Mahdia Secondary School, Mahdia, on the night of 20/21 May, 2023, that resulted in the deaths of twenty (20) children, injuries to persons and the destruction of the dormitory.

In keeping with the terms of reference as published in the Official Gazette, we were required to report to His Excellency, in writing, our findings, having been asked to: -

1. Inquire into and report on the events and circumstances leading up to and causes of the Mahdia Dormitory Fire on the night of 21st May, 2023.
2. Inquire and report upon the actions taken to provide swift care, medical attention, and other forms of support and assistance to the injured and the families and relatives of the deceased.
3. Make such recommendations and observations as the Commission may deem fit, including such measures and actions that the Commission may consider necessary and

appropriate to prevent the recurrence of such tragedy.

To complete this task, this Commission was given a life span of two (2) months. However, due to the exigencies of witnesses who had to be transported from interior locations in Guyana, and other matters not within the control of the Commission, His Excellency graciously extended the life of this Commission by one (1) month to complete its work.

In pursuance of these terms of reference, this Commission employed three principal phases, (I) evidence gathering, (II) oral hearing and (III) report writing. Counsel to the Commission engaged in a robust process of investigation and consultation with survivors, parents, first responders, government agency heads and other public officials, inter alia, as a means of gathering cogent evidence and material from which the Commissioners were competently led.

Our Commission paid two (2) visits to the town of Mahdia as a means of consulting with those affected, inspecting pertinent locations and gathering evidence to assist the Commission in its work. We also visited the communities of Karisparu, Chenapau, Micobie, and Campbelltown, where we met with Tshaos and other village leaders to understand the concerns which arose since the tragic event, and to have their input for the

recommendations on the way forward. A debt of gratitude is owed to all of the persons who appeared before the Commission or in any way provided information to the Commission to execute its function.

In terms of oral hearings, the Commission commenced its sittings on the 15th September, 2023 and concluded same on the 3rd November, 2023, with a total of twenty-nine (29) witnesses testifying before us. Of this line up, summonses were formally issued for two (2) witnesses to provide testimony. Fourteen (14) of these witnesses provided evidence to the Commission via witness statements, some of which included documentary exhibits. We also received one (1) written submission. Witnesses were cross examined by Counsel to the Commission and questions were asked by Commissioners. Though an Attorney-at-Law expressed concern about the work of the Commission and the potential prejudice which could be caused to a minor who was before the courts in relation to events from the fire and on whose behalf, he had been acting, he entered no appearance before the Commission. His fears were duly allayed by the Commission through its Secretary who advised that systems were implemented to protect the rights of all minors involved.

The Commission recognized the importance of ensuring the rights of every minor were respected and protected and did in fact ensure adequate provisions were in place for same. The Commission also recognized the need for its dealings to be conducted in a transparent manner and for the flow of information to be

open to the public. This we believe generated confidence and integrity in the process. We therefore placed no prohibitions on members of the public attending sittings of the Commission save for in camera hearings where sensitive information in relation to the minors were received. Additionally, media houses were conditionally permitted to carry written, audio and video reports of the work of the Commission and testimonies of witnesses once the content did not violate the safeguards imposed by us. Nevertheless, in response to any potential concern, we established ground rules regarding the conduct of our oral hearings and directed the following: -

- That there be no live streaming of the hearings;
- That the evidence of minors who survived the tragedy be taken in camera during hearings;
- That the names and other sensitive information regarding the deceased minors and survivors of this tragedy shall not be disclosed;
- That media houses providing coverage of the hearings of this Inquiry act responsibly in reporting the events which occurred during and following the fire.

Throughout oral hearings, we remained cognizant of the fact that following the death of those involved in the fire, a minor was charged with 20 counts of murder. It was reported to us that the matter was currently engaging a judicial process and due process was being had. In all our dealings, we ensured that proceedings were conducted fairly and without prejudice

to the constitutional and international human rights of the said minor. We therefore directed that all information regarding the role of the minor involved should not be reported and or disclosed. We accordingly took the further step of excluding the media from the testimony of any witness who had information about the alleged role of the minor in the cause of the fire at the dormitory. We thank the media for complying with the orders of this Commission as there were no reported instances of any breach thereof.

Of the witnesses who testified, four (4) were minors who survived the tragedy. Counsel to the Commission embarked on a course of satisfying the Commission that these witnesses understood the nature of the testimony they were providing to the Commission and that they were competent to so do. A parent or guardian of each minor was also permitted to be present during their testimony for added support. In all circumstances, we found and so deemed these minors to be competent to testify before the Commission.

Finally, upon conclusion of oral hearings, we reviewed all the material presented before the Commission and embarked on a process of analysis and report writing. We herein submit our findings and make appropriate recommendations in keeping with the terms of reference entrusted to us.

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# TERM OF REFERENCE #1

“Events and  
circumstances leading  
up to and causes of  
Mahdia Dormitory Fire  
on 21st May 2023”





## THE TOWN OF MAHDIA & REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The town of Mahdia is situated in Administrative Region number 8, Potaro Siparuni. The Region is one of the most challenging in terms of geographical movement, being interspersed by mountains, rugged terrain, swift flowing rivers and tributaries, forests, and savannahs. Communities are widely dispersed and connected by rivers, foot trails, and in most cases, small airstrips serviced by aircraft such as the Cessnas and Islanders.



Mahdia formally received its status as a township in the year 2018 and has since enjoyed an array of amenities associated with township status such as medical facilities, a Police Station, a Magistrate's Court, a Fire Station, Regional Democratic Offices and other public facilities, inter alia. The town's main economic activities are those of mining and farming. It can be observed that some residents also engage in business activities of varying degrees as a means of income earning. While Mahdia is home to a mix of Guyanese ethnicities, it is predominantly populated by

our Amerindian brothers and sisters.



The town is also home to a singular secondary educational institution, the Mahdia Secondary School. Accordingly, students from far reaching villages such as Karisparu, Chenapau and Micobie, inter alia, travel to the town where they reside at dorm facilities in order to obtain higher learning. This, we understand from the evidence of the Chief Education Officer, commenced in 2017 under the previous administration. During our hearings, we discovered that as at the 21st May, 2023, approximately 132 (one hundred thirty-two) students were being housed at the Mahdia Secondary School male and female dormitory.



During the hearings, the Commission was informed of the system of administration in the Region, whereby administrative command and management of the Region is entrusted in the Regional Executive Office. We learnt that the authority relationship between the Ministry of Education and the Region 8 Administration is such that the Ministry of Education has responsibility for policy relating to the content of curricula, while it is the Region, through the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, via the Regional Democratic Council, that has responsibility for the delivery of the education in the schools, the staffing of schools, the welfare and wellbeing of staff and students and the maintenance and upgrading of infrastructure and facilities. This fact was first disclosed by the Chief Education Officer in the Ministry of Education (CEO), Mr. Saddam Hussein and later confirmed by both the former Permanent Secretary of the said Ministry Mrs. Prema Ramana-Roopnarine, as well as the REO, Mr. Peter Ramotar.

The governance structure for education in the Region comprises the Regional Executive Officer (REO), who is the senior government functionary in the Region, and a Regional Education Officer (REDO) whose responsibility it is to ensure efficient operational management of the schools and dormitories through the Headmasters and Headmistresses of the schools. The Headmasters and Headmistresses have a reporting function to the REDO and the REDO reports to the REO. Annual budgets, compliance with standard operational procedures (SOPs), and routine visits and inspections are under the portfolio of the Heads of the Schools. The oversight function is the responsibility of the REDO, and ultimately the REO. In addition, the REDO has a responsibility to submit education policy compliance reports to the Ministry of Education (MOE) through the Deputy Chief Education Officer (Administration) (DCEO Admin). The REDO is therefore responsible for the efficient management of schools, dormitories, their staffing, the welfare and wellbeing of the staff and students in all schools within the Region. Oversight functions are carried out by the REO as these relate to the administering of schools and delivery of education. The DCEO (Admin) has oversight of the compliance within the Region with the policies and standards established by the MOE.



*Mahdia Secondary School*

## THE GENDER SENSITIVE STANDARDS FOR DORMITORY SCHOOLS IN GUYANA (THE MOE/UNICEF REPORT), THE RYAN SCOTT REPORT & THE MAHDIA SECONDARY SCHOOL DORMITORY

Before we delve into the MOE/UNICEF Report, we considered it appropriate to align the context of our examination with the state of the education sector for the period dating back to 2015 based on information received during our hearings. We learnt from the Chief Education Officer that in 2015, the then Minister of Education, Dr Rupert Roopnarine commissioned an inquiry to conduct an assessment of the Education Sector in Guyana. According to the report which was tendered before us and titled, Commission of Inquiry into the Education Sector of Guyana Preliminary Report, the objective of the inquiry was to establish a baseline analysis of the state of public education in Guyana, and to provide recommendations of broad strategic guidelines for the enhancement of public education.

The Commission of Inquiry comprised Mr. Ed Caesar -a former Chief Education Officer, Mr Ronald Austin (Jnr), Ms. Jennifer Dewar - representing the Religious Organizations, Mr Lance Hinds - an IT Specialist, and Mr Ramesh Persaud -the representative of the Private Sector. They were assisted by a team of technical and administrative officials. The Commission conducted 99 consultations throughout Guyana and received 50 written submissions. The Commission tabled its Preliminary Report to the Minister of Education on 28th April, 2017.

The report placed high emphasis on the deplorable state of student dormitories and made recommendations that they should be addressed. It stated that attention must be paid to the level and quality of supervision in dorm facilities. It also reported that in general, 'House Parents' were not trained for their task and that they had too many students to overlook and were being taken advantage of. The report also found that the issues raised were most present among secondary school students who were facing the most challenging times of their lives and required greater care and supervision.

Having heard of this assessment and report, we inquired from the CEO as to the efforts taken to comply with the recommendations from this 2017 report. Regrettably, the CEO reported to us that:

*"nothing was done by the Government at that time to implement the recommendations of the Report....." "No steps, no steps were taken into 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020, up to July.....  
The Report identified dorms. I have seen from that document, a checklist on issues raised, whether those have been fixed from 2017, and dorms was not ticked. Nothing was done. Absolutely nothing was done, which is callous."*



*Chief Education Officer – Mr. Saddam Hussain*

He also pointed out that the Report did not include an audit of dormitories in Guyana. However, the CEO also told us an audit was conducted into the Education Sector during the period of 2015 – 2020 under the auspices of the then Minister of Education, Dr. Rupert Roopnarine. According to the CEO, the audit made no mention of the conditions of the dormitories.

## **THE MOE/UNICEF CONSULTANCY REPORT**

We now turn our focus to the MOE/UNICEF Report. The Chief Education Officer tendered before the Commission a further report titled, the Gender Sensitive Standards for Dormitory Schools in Guyana. We learnt from the CEO that the work conducted to produce the said report was as a direct result of the initiative of the Minister of Education, Hon. Priya Manickchand. The Minister considered it critical that a survey of all dormitory facilities be conducted.

According to the CEO in his tendered

statement (“MHS1”), it was intended that the review and consequential recommendations from the survey of the dormitories would be included as part of the Education Sector Plan for 2021 – 2025. He also stated that the report was in fact placed in the Education Sector Plan with the aim of improving live-in dormitory facilities by reviewing and restructuring the piloted dormitory’s psycho-social programme and ensuring compliance with quality health and sanitary standards at dormitory facilities. Consequently, in or around September 2021, the Ministry of Education with the financial help of UNICEF sought the services of a consultant to thoroughly report on: -

1. The minimum standards required at dormitories that housed children attending schools;
2. A condition survey identifying the gaps (both identification of gaps and recommendations to fix and approximate cost to so address) that currently exist at each school dorm in the country vis a vis the said report.

The MOE/UNICEF Report dated 24th May 2022 was tendered before the Commission. The report was thorough and captured in-depth, recommendations regarding the minimum standards for dormitory facilities in Guyana.

With respect to the standards for designs and retrofit of key functional spaces in the dormitory facilities, the report considered that each dormitory bedroom shall accommodate a maximum of four (4) students. The report gave guidance for the size, layout and location of each room, specifications for windows and

doors in terms of size and that the latter should swing outward. It also provided guidance regarding the required floor finish and walls for dormitory living quarters, ceiling, electrical system composition, room contents inter alia.

Of particular importance were the guidelines contained in the report for the necessary fire protection systems to be implemented for the prevention of fires across dormitories in Guyana. The report insisted on the placement of fire alarm systems, smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, inter alia, with specifications for their placement in terms of distance and amounts when compared to the number of occupants for each dorm. The report also mandated that the fire systems once installed should be checked, tested and maintained at least once per year by the Fire Department or qualified person appointed by the Ministry of Education.

Furthermore, the report iterated the necessity for fire drills to be interwoven into the education system. It stated that fire drills should be held three (3) times per school term and should include all students and staff and should be based on established Ministry of Education fire drill procedures. Additionally, training in the use of fire extinguishers, fire sand bucket and evacuation procedures should be done for students and all staff at least once per school academic year. The report also insisted that procedures for evacuation of dormitory buildings should be clearly identified, and indication of assembly areas should be documented in a printed form and affixed near all building exits. Furthermore, printed information should be posted in visible areas with fire safety rules, evacuation procedures and identification of assembly safe zone/area.

The Commission considered the content of the MOE/UNICEF report to be both crucial and instructive. In all respects, the report provided comprehensive and often times specific and detailed guidelines to improve the welfare and safety of children occupying dorm facilities in Guyana. We were particularly interested in the steps ensued following the report. The Chief Education Officer informed us during his testimony that upon receipt of the report, same was put before the Cabinet sometime thereafter by the Minister of Education and immediately shared with the Ministers of Local Government and Regional Development and Finance.

We were informed by the CEO that following submission of the report to Cabinet, immediate systems were put in place for the implementation of the recommendations captured therein. He explained that the cost for compliance with the recommendations contained in the report across all 24 dorms in this country was about \$3,000,000,000 (three billion dollars). He expressed the view that due to its submission after the budget cycle for 2022, it was difficult for this sum to be generated immediately to cover the full cost of the renovations

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and other recommendations in the report. He reported that nevertheless, a Cabinet decision was taken to provide a response to the recommendations contained in the report. In this regard more than \$882,000,000 (eight hundred eighty-two million dollars) was expended by the Government therefor. He also advised that this sum was soon expected to exceed \$1,000,000,000 (one billion dollars) since a number of awards for the dorms were in the process of being finalized. The CEO stated as follows;

*"Following that Report, immediately systems began to be put in place for the implementation and the subsequent renovations to the dorms. What has to be understood is, the costing of this Report is close to about three billion Guyana dollars, that had to be found in order to fix all of the dorms. This was middle of 2022. Budget had already passed and so there was not a \$3 billion lying around that you could just pull and renovate.... I think this is something which is missed. Let us say, for the sake of argument that in September 2022, we began the process of renovating all the dorms. What do I do with the occupants of the dorms? This was the professional decision which was tendered to the Minister and the Government of Guyana. You cannot take out all the students from the dorms and just let them be. We felt it was a better option to gradually repair the dorms....*

*.... That very Report says that Mahdia was not one of the top priorities to be addressed. In fact, Mahdia had one issue and that is with a constant supply of electricity and water..... I am advised through two sources that the Report was shared with Cabinet – one, I attended a number of budgetary meetings. And so, from those meetings, I gathered that this document was laid to the Cabinet. I also .... was copied to an email which suggested to me that the Report was made...was laid...was copied to the Minister of Finance, as well as to the Minister of Local Government and from that, I gathered that it was laid in Cabinet...it was laid to the Cabinet. I also gathered from the email that there was immediate...there was an immediate decision by Cabinet to move ahead with the correction of those things that needed to be done. I can say at this point.... I could add at this point, up to today, \$882 million has been expended on dorms from 2022 to current. By the end of the year, we expect to touch a billion dollars because we are still awaiting a number of awards for these dorms...'*

We, therefore, accepted the CEO's evidence that the Ministry's approach to implementation was informed by the summary of costs and sections priority for dormitory plants contained in the report. In the said report the 24 dorms were ranked according to dorms which required critical and immediate action to be taken in terms of infrastructure and renovation. He stated as follows;;

*"So, there were...There are 24 dormitory facilities and the top five which needed fixing were identified by the person that did the report, by the engineering firm that did the report for the Ministry of Education. Mahdia was not in that five. Mahdia was not in that five which means that it was not as critical as some of the others."*

We, therefore, learnt that as a result of the report and decisions taken at the level of the Cabinet, it was determined that it was a better option to gradually repair the dorms. Thus 9 of the 24 dorms in the country were and continue to be upgraded, rehabilitated, renovated and retrofitted in accordance with the standards outlined in the MOE/UNICEF report.

We note from the report's assessment that the Mahdia Secondary School Dormitories did not rank even in the top 5 dormitories which required most urgent attention and intervention. According to the CEO, during the consultation phase held by the consultancy of this initiative, the only issues which were highlighted for Mahdia were issues regarding stable water and electricity supply. He stated that these were the only critical issues presented by stakeholders at the Mahdia Dorm. The stakeholders included male students, female students, parents, Headteacher of the School and dormitory staff.

In the aftermath, armed with hindsight of the tragedy of Mahdia, it is indeed unfortunate that the Mahdia dorm did not feature higher on the order of priority, provided by the very report, and thus was not immediately addressed. However, it did not, a fact which cannot now be rewritten.

## THE RYAN SCOTT REPORT

The Commission heard that on 7th February, 2023, an inspection was carried out at the Mahdia Dormitory facility by Sub-Officer in Charge of the Mahdia Fire Station, Mr. Ryan Scott. Following this inspection, Sub-Officer Scott prepared a report which he addressed to the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) of the Guyana Fire Service, Mr. Gregory Wickham and copied to Regional Education Officer (REDO) for Region 8, Ms. Annesta Douglas. From the evidence before us, we are satisfied that the said report which we shall hereafter refer to as the "Ryan Scott Report" was submitted to and personally received by both the CFO and REDO.



*Sub-Officer in Charge of Mahdia Fire Station - Mr. Ryan Scott*

The report sets out a list of deficiencies associated with the Mahdia dormitories. It cited that for the dormitory buildings, there was a complete absence of any fire prevention system. Accordingly, there was no fire alarm system, no fire detection system, no exit signs and no smoke detection system. The report also highlighted that there were only three (3) fire extinguishers provided in the buildings and grills were seen on all the windows.

The report went on to provide a list of twelve (12) requirements/recommendations to address fire prevention at the facility. These included: -

1. A suitable fire alarm system which can give sufficient audible warning throughout the premises must be provided.
2. All final exits (doors) must be constructed to open outwards along the line of exit travel.
3. Suitable exit signs red in colour on white background not less than 100mm in height, must be conspicuously displayed over all final exits.
4. Precise instructions with actions to be taken in the event of a fire must be prominently displayed on the walls throughout the building.
5. Suitable storage facilities (racks, shelves, cupboards, etc.) must be provided for all items. They must be constructed or situated in such a way that allows free and adequate passageway to be maintained.
6. All items stored in the building must be neatly arranged leaving a minimum clearance of at least 30cm from ceiling level and 15cm in any other direction.
7. No fuel must be stored on the premises without permission from this department.
8. A high standard of housekeeping must be maintained throughout the building at all times.
9. Grills must be removed from all windows immediately.
10. Six (6) fire extinguishers along with six (6) smoke detectors must be provided and all Fire Extinguishers must be hung on brackets with their handles 1.4m from floor level to facilitate handling by persons of any height.
11. Efforts must be made for all staff to be trained in the use and operation of firefighting equipment (fire extinguishers) and evacuation procedures.
12. Hydrants must be installed. Note: the water main leading to the dorms is 2" in diameter.

### ***Chief Fire Officer***

The CFO confirmed to the Commission that at all material times, he was in receipt of the Ryan Scott Report. The CFO told us that he was aware of all the infractions regarding the Mahdia School Dormitory which were highlighted in the report as well as the 12 (twelve) recommendations/requirements listed therein. He told the Commission that he understood

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the report as requiring an urgent response and the necessity for the recommendations contained therein to be complied with. At the same time, the CFO told us even with this understanding, his only effort to secure compliance with the recommendations was “to ensure that the REDO in that particular area was in receipt of the said report”. The CFO was adamant that even though the report was addressed to him, the regular standard operating procedure to be followed was for him to ensure the document was received by the REDO. When asked about his familiarity with the REDO for Region 8, he told us that he could not remember the name of the officer and that he personally made no efforts to confirm whether the REDO was indeed in receipt of the report.



*Chief Fire Officer – Mr. Gregory Wickham*

When asked about the report’s recommendation regarding the installation of water hydrants, the CFO agreed that this action fell outside of the jurisdiction of the REDO. It is important to note that the CFO in his evidence stated that he considered the compound which situated the Mahdia Dormitories to be of high risk by virtue of the fact that a large number of children were being housed at a State-owned facility which was situated in that vicinity. He stated that the nonplacement of a water hydrant at this facility was due to the size of water mains placed by the Guyana Water Inc in the area. He informed us that setting up a fire hydrant required a 6-inch water main and that the area was only equipped with 4-inch mains which were unsuitable for the placement of a hydrant.

Regarding his efforts to secure compliance, he stated that the Guyana Fire Service informed “GWI that they needed to ensure that they had the mains fixed to be the particular type that would afford us the opportunity to plant the hydrant there”. By his own admission, this was the extent of his response in relation to the Ryan Scott Report. Again, there was no system of follow-up to see through that the request was actioned. The Commission views this as unacceptable on the part of the CFO.

The CFO was asked whether by virtue of him being the most senior officer in the Guyana Fire Service, he consulted with other senior officials who had the capacity to treat with the report. To this he responded in the negative in that he made no efforts to forward the report to other senior government functionaries for their intervention. This fact was confirmed on the part of the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Mrs. Mae Toussant Thomas, under whose administrative jurisdiction the Guyana Fire Service fell. She told the Commission that the report was never brought to her attention by the CFO or any other member of the Guyana Fire Service.

The Permanent Secretary Thomas was keen to note that the Ministry of Home Affairs' operational procedures have always allowed for responses to emergency situations even where it was not budgeted for or predicted.

### ***Regional Education Officer***

Ms. Annesta Douglas, the former REDO for Region 8 testified before the Commission and informed us that she assumed duties as REDO for Region 8 in January 2022 after having served as REDO for Region 3. Ms. Douglas told us that her stint as REDO for Region 3 was interrupted by virtue of her being reassigned to the Central Ministry's Office for a special assignment. She also told us that during her special assignment to the Central Office, she received no official list of duties, nor any work associated with her level of experience and competence.

Ms. Douglas confirmed to the Commission that on the 7th day of February 2023, Sub-Officer Scott delivered to her his report following an inspection of the Mahdia dorm facility on the very said day. She indicated to us that during this exchange, Mr. Scott personally impressed on her the urgency and attention with which the report must be treated, however, she placed the report in an urgent stub on her desk with other files. We learnt from the CEO that it was required for a report of this nature to be submitted to the DCEO (Administration) and the REO who had oversight responsibility for the REDO.

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*Former Regional Educational Officer Ms. Annesta Douglas*

Ms. Douglas told us that on the 8th February 2023, she received news from the Principal Personnel Officer, Ms. Loise Armstrong, that she was again being transferred or reassigned to the Ministry's Central Office. Ms. Douglas told us that this was confirmed on 9th February 2023, when she received a correspondence addressed from the REO, Mr. Ramotar, advising that she was indeed being reassigned to Georgetown and that she had one (1) week to hand over the education department in Region 8. She was instructed to assume duties pursuant to the said reassignment on 16th February 2023 Ms. Douglas told us that having received the letter of reassignment, her first response was to seek an extension of the period in the letter, but this was purportedly denied. In the circumstances, her "focus shifted from the report to handing over the department in one week".

The REDO was also questioned as to whether, and if so, what steps she took to ensure that the report which she considered urgent, was brought to or given urgent attention by whoever the department was surrendered to. Ms. Douglas informed us that the kind of attention needed for her response would have required her to meet with the REO who was unavailable to her since she was trying to meet with him to discuss her reassignment. She reported to us that having received her letter of reassignment, she was not given the courtesy of a meeting with the REO, nor the opportunity of his intervention for the period to be extended.

We, however, found great difficulty in accepting the reasons outlined by Ms. Douglas as justifiable reasons for the manner in which she handled the report. Ms. Douglas admitted that she received the report and despite it being impressed on her to treat as urgent, she completely ignored the report and the contents of the report.

In other words, the report was never referred to other senior officials in the REO's Office for their action since the officer whose primary concern should have been the welfare of students concerned in the report was more consumed by her reassignment and other personal traumas. According to the DREO, Mr. Shaun Britton, when the department was handed over to him, not only was there no trace of the Ryan Scott report, but the compiled list of documents from Ms. Douglas made no mention of the said report. Mr. Britton in fact told the Commission that the Ryan Scott's report only came to the knowledge of the REO's office after it became a sore point of contention after the fire.

### ***The Mahdia Secondary School Dormitory***

We heard that a total of 132 students were housed at the dormitory facilities as at 21st May, 2023. In the male dormitory there were 71 boys while in the female dormitory there were 59 girls (2 of the students were granted leave and were away from the Dormitory that night). We learnt that the lone male deceased, Adonejha Jerome, aged 5, also resided in the female dormitory where he shared a space with his mother, the House Supervisor, Ms. Carleta Williams and his sister Kayla.



*Plot of land where The Mahdia Dormitory was situated*

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The female dormitory, before its destruction, comprised of a flat concrete edifice situated in a compound and to its immediate north is the male dormitory. East of the male dormitory is a dining hall where the students take meals, and which they use as a social space and for study sessions. North of the dining hall is a Resource Centre which at some point in time was used by the students for their benefit of conducting online research or manually perusing books.



We learnt from the House Supervisor that prior to the fire, the female dorm had six (6) bedrooms for the girls, a washroom area containing three (3) toilets, two (2) bathrooms and a storage room with solar panel batteries. It was reported by the House Supervisor that from 2019 when she assumed duties at the dorm, she lived in the storage room with her two minor children, one now deceased and Kayla Jerome, who survived the tragedy.

We learnt that the 6 bedrooms designated for the girls differed in their sizes. In each room, there were bunkbeds. The six bedrooms were separated by a corridor with three bedrooms on the left side and three bedrooms on the right side of the dorm. The dorm had 5 wooden doors - two single doors and a double door in the centre of the southern wall of the building and two single doors on the northern wall of the building. According to Ms. Williams, the doors on the northern wall were never in use but the other doors were used to enter and exit the dorm. All doors swung inward. The doors were all secured by locks which carried keys that were together kept in possession of the House Supervisor in a bunch. Each room had windows, about 4 in number, which were all grilled from the inside of each room.

We learnt from the House Supervisor that the female dormitory carried no fire alarm system nor smoke detection system and unused mattresses were stored on top of an unserviceable washing machine in the corridor next to the locked north western single door. The House Supervisor also informed us that the dorm only had one (1) fire extinguisher which was kept

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in the storage room where she resided. She told us that at no time was she ever a party to any form of training in fire prevention methods or protocols, nor was she aware of any inspection being conducted on the building by either the Guyana Fire Service or otherwise. This was also confirmed by Mrs. Amanda Peters-Nedd who served as the Deputy Head Teacher of the Mahdia Secondary School and lived at Teachers' Quarters in close proximity to the dorm facility. Sub-Officer and Officer in Charge of the Mahdia Fire Station, Mr. Ryan Scott also reported of these lapses. He also reported to us that though the situation of the dorm facility was considered as high risk due to it being occupied by a large number of children, there were no water hydrants installed at or in close proximity to the facility. He testified that issues related to the proper water main systems being in place prevented the installation of water hydrants at the facility. These issues he suggested could only be resolved by the Guyana Water Incorporated (GWI).

From the evidence of these witnesses, we observed that the Mahdia Female Dormitory was not in a state of readiness for the unfortunate tragedy which claimed the lives of 20 minors on the night of Sunday the 21st May, 2023.

## **SOCIAL, SOCIETAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES**

The House Supervisor, the Deputy Headmistress, the students, and their parents highlighted to the Commission the many social, societal, and cultural issues which plagued the students.

The temptations of a town coupled with the irresponsible unlawful conduct of adult men, including some from their own villages, resulted in some female students being involved in sexual intercourse and the use of drugs and alcohol - including marijuana and vape.

This led to some students breaching the dorm rules by using their cellular phones to contact and stay in contact with adult males. These activities by some students also put at risk the safety and welfare of other students and eventually culminated in the tragedy of 21st May, 2023.

The House supervisor reported to us that those were some of the factors which influenced the installation and maintenance of the grills to prevent intruders from entering the building and the students from unauthorized departure from the dormitory.

The Commission was also informed of certain pull factors such as the lure of money, which resulted in the grooming of female students, and the complicit involvement of some family

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members in channeling funds and gifts including cellular phones to some female students.

There was no welfare officer or guidance counsellor attached to the dormitory. It was only in 2023 that an off-region Welfare Officer was attached to the region.

The development of deviant behavior patterns was at the center of the events leading up to the fire.

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## EVENTS OF SUNDAY 21ST MAY 2023

During our hearings, it became abundantly clear to us that recounting the tragic events at the Mahdia Female Dormitory on the 21st May, 2023, grew increasingly difficult with every portion of testimony and would take a profound amount of strength and courage to complete such testimony. Witnesses who testified about the events of this night appeared traumatized and were visibly filled with sadness, emotion and grief. In some instances, we had to pause our inquiry to allow witnesses to contend with their emotion and grief. This Commission therefore salutes these persons for their display of courage in reliving, in great details, the facts of what transpired on the night in question.

We heard of an incident which transpired on the evening in question, hours before the blaze began. It was reported that a student who we will refer to henceforth by reference "ABX", was in breach of one of the rules of the dorm by having a cellular phone in her possession.

We learnt that earlier in the week, following a home visit, ABX purportedly returned to the dorm with a cellular phone and from that time to the date of the incident, she was visibly using the mobile device, especially during late hours. The House Supervisor reported to us that at about 21:00hrs on the evening of the 21st of May, 2023, she received information of ABX having the mobile device in her possession. Her immediate response was to remind ABX of the prohibition of the use of mobile devices, except when they were being used for academic research purposes. We were made to understand that in such an instance, mobile device was to be surrendered to the House Supervisor by 9pm for safe keeping until it was required again to conduct research. According to the House Supervisor, all of her requests for surrendering the device were ignored by the minor ABX. She eventually sought the intervention of the Deputy Headteacher, Mrs. Amanda Peters-Nedd.

From Mrs. Peters-Nedd's account, we were told that ABX refused to hand over the phone. There appeared to have been some form of hostility from ABX during this exchange which eventually led to the Deputy Headteacher taking the phone away from her. ABX then threatened the House Supervisor, and the Deputy HM as follows:

*"problem y'all want, problem y'all gon get or  
the same phone gon cause problem"*



Another witness Student SX stated that after ABX's phone was taken from her:

*"she say, i would just bun down this dorms.  
if I didn't get to do it tonight, i will do it  
tomorrow."*

## THE GUYANA FIRE SERVICE

The Guyana Fire Service is a nationally important agency falling under the Ministry of Home Affairs. In theory, its stature is likened unto that of the Guyana Police Force and Guyana Defence Force. Regrettably, the realities with which we were confronted regarding the leadership of the Guyana Fire Service and the state of the Mahdia Fire Station leave more to be desired.

### *Mahdia Fire Station*

We learnt that the Mahdia Fire Station was a newly commissioned facility with its construction concluding in 2017. Despite the town benefiting from this brand-new facility, the station had no trained officers. Instead, volunteers referred to as "auxiliary fire fighters" with no official or formal training and experience in firefighting were entrusted with operating firefighting equipment and responding to any eventuality of a fire. We learnt that an All-Terrain (AT) Fire Engine (Fire Tender) was assigned to Mahdia around 2012 but from then until 2022 was stored in the RDC Compound and maintained by auxiliary fire fighters under the direction of the REO.



*Mahdia Fire Tender and Bowser*

In July of 2022, the Guyana Fire Service took action to operationalize the Mahdia Fire Station. Accordingly, Sub-Officer Ryan Scott, was seconded from Headquarters of the Guyana Fire Service to head the station, and serve as the Officer in Charge and Head of the station's Operations Department. Seven (7) regular fire officers were also deployed to the Mahdia Station.

Mr. Scott reported to us that having assumed command, he conducted an inspection and assessment of the station and its equipment to determine their effectiveness to undertake the function associated with firefighting. By email dated 4th August, 2022, Sub-Officer Scott reported to the Chief Fire Officer the condition of the AT1 Hinterland (Fire Tender) and its ability to provide an effective fire response. In the report, Sub-Officer Scott impressed on the Fire Chief that there was a need for urgent attention to be given to the following: -

1. That the Fire Tender required a change of tires due to one being burst and beyond repair and others seriously damaged;
2. That the cab of the Fire Tender was rotting due to it suffering from flooding;
3. That the Fire Tender was not idling;
4. That the pedal was broken;
5. That the seats were damaged and stained with red loam;
6. That the ladder rack was broken off;
7. That the head lamp required replacing due to it providing poor lighting;
8. That a siren was needed;
9. That the hose reel was out of order;
10. That the Fire Tender needed spraying and body work;
11. That beacon lights were not working and required replacement.

On 9th August 2022, Sub-Officer Scott provided another report to the CFO, this time identifying a number of items which were urgently needed at the Mahdia Fire Station to safely, effectively and efficiently carry out the function of the Guyana Fire Service. He accordingly requested one (1) light pump, one (1) power saw, one (1) disc cutter, one (1) compressor, one (1) jaws of life, one (1) hydraulic ram, two (2) rescue lines, four (4) pairs of carabiners, one (1) pair harness, one (1) descender, one (1) pair anchor strap, one (1) tripod, six (6) pullies, one (1) sled stretcher, one (1) sledge hammer, fifteen (15) lengths of delivery hose, two (2) basket strainers, one (1) bolt cutter, three (3) cutlasses, two (2) branches, four (4) breathing apparatus sets and cylinders, one (1) pair of torch lights, one (1) spot light, one (1) paid ceiling hook, one (1) crowbar, one (1) pair suction wrenches, one (1) pair ascenders and one (1) stretcher.

Officer Scott testified that he never received a response to this e-mail and the Mahdia Fire

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Station was not equipped with many of items which he requested. The officer stated they had a light pump, and a power saw.

### ***Response to the fire on 21st May, 2023***

According to Sub-Officer Scott, at about 23:12hrs on the 21st day of May, 2023 while being stationed at the Mahdia Fire Station, he received a running call from an identifiable male advising him that the female dorm was on fire. Following this, Officer Scott and other on duty officers equipped themselves with Personal Protective Equipment and prepared the Fire Tender for the response and then departed for the scene. Officer Scott reported to us that upon arrival at the Mahdia Secondary School dormitory, he observed the female dorm to be fully engulfed in flames. He stated that at this time, the southern part of the building's roof had collapsed and the building had about 80% red flames signifying the presence of combustible material such as wood and about 10% blue flames signifying the presence of a flammable substance such as batteries. Officer Scott told us that the blue flames were consistent with solar batteries which were kept in the store room of the building which was also used as living quarters for the House Supervisor and her two (2) minor children.

Ryan Scott told us that he first sought to account for the children in the fire and by this was able to account for about 16 of the children. He, the other officers as well as auxiliary officers who by this time arrived at the scene, then moved to effect a rescue of the other students trapped in the building. He told us that after doing a 360-degree scan of the burning building, he determined that room 2 on the north eastern corner would be the easiest access point to effect rescue. He accordingly identified a 6 x 6 wooden plank and, with assistance from his colleagues and some civilians, was able to breach room 2 by creating a hole in the wall. Once the wall was breached, Scott used the hose with a jet of water to create a rescue path. Once a rescue path was established, persons went into the dorm and effected "rescue of about 26 to 28 persons". Of the rescued persons, some were conscious, others were unconscious and some had burns about their bodies.



*The Southern and Eastern Sides of the Mahdia Female Dormitory (room on left is where the Dorm Mother lived)*

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Sub-Officer Scott also told us that by the time the rescue path was created, the Fire Tender ran out of water since its capacity was only 450 gallons of water. This supply of water was accordingly exhausted within three (3) minutes. This prompted Scott to leave the scene with the Fire Tender in search of the nearest source to replenish the water tank. This source was identified about 2 miles from the fire at a location on the airstrip road. During this time, Scott testified that he instructed the auxiliary officers to utilize hose equipment and a mobile pump from the appliance to hose water from a nearby drain to assist in extinguishing the fire. Upon his return from refilling the tank at airstrip road and realizing there was no progress with the mobile pump, he went to the location where he determined that water was prevented from being lifted due to clogging of the drain and debris from trees in the drain. This then triggered his response to enter the drain and manually clear away the debris and other items creating the clogging. Water was then lifted from the drain. Ryan Scott told us that after a few hours, at about 3:00am, the fire was fully extinguished.

Sub-Officer Scott recounted that having extinguished the fire, a search of the building was conducted where 14 bodies burnt beyond recognition were discovered. We were told that 10 bodies were in room 1 (the House Supervisor's room) where the solar panel batteries were situated, 2 bodies were outside the door and 2 more bodies were in the pathway next to room 3. These bodies were handed over to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and the investigation of the cause of the fire was later handed over to the Fire Prevention Department. This decision was made based on the magnitude of the fire and the fire prevention department's specialized training. This investigation was led by GFS Cadet Officer, Javid Mohamed.

### ***Mahdia Fire After Action Report***

Following a response to the events of 21st May, 2023, Sub-Officer prepared, addressed to the Chief Fire Offer, an After-Action report which is dated 22nd May, 2023. The report identified the following problems which were encountered and actions initiated to overcome those problems during the response: -

- Hard to gain access to the compound which was due to a rapid buildup of persons and vehicles;
  - Slow buildup of air in Fire Tender due to leaking airline causing the wheels to lock up;
  - No viable water source in the vicinity of fire resulting in water being shuttled from 2 miles out;
  - Lack of water bowser to be part of initial response;
  - Lack of breathing apparatus sets to aid fire fighters in entering the building;
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- Lack of breaking in tools (sledge hammers, bolt cutters, disc cutters etc.) to assist in breaching the building to gain entry to effect rescue;
- Limited human resource from Guyana Fire Service at initial response. Only 3 trained officers from Mahdia Fire Station were on duty and available resulting in the requirement for off duty personnel to be mobilized;
- Shortage of utility vehicles;
- Lack of subordinate officers and drivers;
- Poor road condition from fire station to main road;
- Need for better 'first out' appliance since the current tender was suffering from age configuration defects, leaking air hose, damaged power steering, damaged lockers, leaking roof, rotten flooring etc.
- Need for additional hoses and branches;
- Lack of rescue equipment.

The report took the format of a questionnaire. To the question of what could have been done differently to change the outcome of the incident, the report identified this to be the installation of a fire detection system at the dormitory, installation of fire hydrants in the area and increased response based on associated risk. To the question of what events/actions hindered rescue, evacuation and prevention of fire spread and extinguishing the fire, the report again reiterated that the age configuration of the Fire Tender was in issue, inadequate initial supply of water, limited human resource in terms of trained officers from the Guyana Fire Service, lack of complete breathing apparatus sets preventing fire fighters from entering the building, the need for a water bowser, the need for a basket strainer and difficulties associated with the heavy grill work on windows of dormitory.

We make the observation from the After-Action report that the actions which hindered accomplishing the assigned objectives are identical to the issues raised by Sub-Officer Ryan Scott in his report of 7th February, 2023 after the inspection of the Mahdia dormitory, as well as the reports of 4th and 9th August, 2022 after inspection of the Mahdia Fire Station. We are reminded that in all three (3) of the identified reports, Sub-Officer Scott impressed on the CFO the urgency with which a response was required.

We expressed great concern to the CFO that at the time of the fire, many of the urgent recommendations in the reports submitted to him were not actioned. This concern was elevated by the fact that the reports identified the absence or unworthiness of a number of tools of trade which, to our minds, are basic essentials for executing the function of firefighting in this country. Yet, from all indications, they were either not provided to the Mahdia Fire Station or in a terrible state of disrepair and disfunction. Further, from all indications, no

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attempt was made to provide the said items.

The CFO told us that in July 2022, he seconded Ryan Scott to take charge of the Mahdia Fire Station and accordingly, he (CFO) was appraised of the deficient state of the station by way of the reports of 4th and 9th August, 2022. He told us that immediately, a team led by the service's maintenance officer was instructed to conduct works on the Fire Tender. He noted that the necessary pieces of equipment and parts, inclusive of tires for the Tender, were taken to Mahdia and repairs effected. Though these instructions were passed, there was no report prepared following the purported maintenance to inform the CFO of the state of the appliance. The CFO indicated that following the maintenance, issues concerning the flooding of the cab, idling of the appliance, broken pedal, damaged seats, head lamps and siren were actioned.

Regarding the report of 9th August 2022, requesting supply of tools of trade for the Mahdia Station, the CFO told us that a team was set up to look at the issues affecting the station and that the needs were met. Upon further inquiry, he was unable to say how many of the needs were in fact supplied but was confident that most of the items were satisfied.

The CFO was confronted with the reality of the Mahdia Station and the issues encountered in its response to the events of 21st May, 2023. To the unavailability of essential items during the response such as breathing apparatus sets and breaking in tools such as sledge hammers, disc cutters and belt croppers inter alia, the CFO explained that the Fire Service was unable to provide such supply "because through our budgetary allocation, we were not able to acquire any at the particular time".

We rejected the CFO's explanation of budgetary constraints as a justification for Mahdia Fire Station not being supplied with essential tools of trade to effectively carry out their functions on the night in question. As we learnt from the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the said ministry has systems in place to respond to any emergency request. An emergency request for the supply of essential tools of trade made at the level of the CFO would not have been denied.

The CFO was also confronted by the portion of the After-Action report which informed that there was a slow buildup of air in the Fire Tender due to leaking in the air line which caused the wheels to lock off. We note that this was an issue which was reported in the Scott report of 4th August, 2022. The CFO relied on the excuse that effluxion of time from the tender's last maintenance caused the mechanical issues to ensue. However, this excuse found little favour with this Commission since it was the CFO who was specifically informed of the

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issues with the tender, which he admitted was an aged appliance. The CFO therefore should have ensured systems were put in place either for a new tender to be provided, or there was regular maintenance and repair of the tender.

At this juncture we also put on record our dissatisfaction that up to the time of the fire, there was no effective system of contacting the Mahdia Fire Station. Sub-Officer Ryan Scott told us that members of the town had to contact his personal mobile phone. The guard who was on duty at the night of the fire did not know Sub-Officer's Scott's number and so could not call him.

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# FINDINGS – TERM OF REFERENCE 1

## THE ED CAESAR REPORT

We find the fact that no action was taken, in relation to the dormitory facilities in this country after the 2017 report, was a grave neglect of duty bordering on recklessness by the persons vested with power, during that period, for the care and welfare of the country's children residing in dormitories.

We therefore find that it was a blatant neglect of these facilities by those in whom authority was bestowed during the period of 2017-2020.

Further we find that the issues highlighted in the report were to a great extent inherited by the current administration from the previous administration. It is to be pointed out that while those said issues are being addressed by the current administration, the magnitude of neglect which was inherited rendered full rectification a time-consuming exercise. Unfortunately, the tragedy struck before more could have been achieved.

## The MOE/UNICEF REPORT

We specifically commend the Minister of Education, Hon. Priya Manickchand for her initiative in commissioning the Ministry of Education/UNICEF Consultancy Survey. We find that the Minister elevated to a place of priority the dormitory facilities which were inherited in a woeful state of neglect across Guyana.

We specifically find that following the submission of the MOE/UNICEF REPORT to Cabinet, systems were immediately put in place for the implementation of the recommendations captured therein.

We find therefore that the process to comply with the recommendations emanating from the report commenced in 2022 to ensure that the dorms were rehabilitated to a standard to preserve the care, safety and welfare of students residing in dorms across Guyana.

We accept that the process is a continuous one and that there is a strong commitment by the Government of Guyana to comply with the recommendations of the MOE/UNICEF report as far as practicably possible.

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## **DEDICATION AND COMMITMENT TO DUTY – RYAN SCOTT**

At the outset, we consider the diligence and dedication in the execution of duties of Sub-Officer Ryan Scott to be worthy of commendation. It would therefore be a missed opportunity if this Commission omitted to highlight such efficiency of this serviceman. His devotion to service is to be emulated by other service men and women in the Guyana Fire Service.

We note that in the face of very limited resources from the Guyana Fire Service, this officer took the initiative and exemplified bravery in all his dealings in responding to the fire on the evening of 21st May 2023. We consider these traits to be fitting for emulation by all members of the Guyana Fire Service. It is certain that the Guyana Fire Service would benefit from Mr. Scott serving at a higher leadership capacity in the Service.

## **DERELICTION OF DUTY - CFO**

We consider it unfortunate and inauspicious that the Ryan Scott report which contained critical information in the interest of life and fire safety, was given scant regard by the CFO who admitted that of the 12 recommendations contained therein, his action was only taken in relation to that concerning fire hydrants. This is so while admitting to inquiries from Counsel to the Commission that regarding this specific recommendation, he informed Guyana Water Inc. (GWI) of the requirement to have water mains upgraded and nothing else. This we consider to be bare minimum action and certainly not a fulfillment of the duties bestowed on the most senior fire officer of this country.

We interpret the CFO's explanation that the standard operating procedure only required him to ensure the REDO was furnished with the report, as essentially passing off onto the REDO, the responsibility of ensuring that the emergency recommendations in the report were brought to life. We also find it regrettable that in all circumstances and even with all his experience as the most senior fire officer in this country, the CFO did not see the need, nor did he take the initiative, to communicate to the Permanent Secretary of his Ministry, the said emergency recommendations. It is expected that the head of the fire service of any country, being in possession of reports such as these, would go beyond the bounds of duty and service to ensure compliance therewith. This we feel, in all circumstances, was lacking from the Chief Fire Officer.

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## **DERELICTION OF DUTY AND NEGLIGENCE - REDO**

The conduct of the REDO was not far from that of the CFO. If we are to accept the timeline of events as was suggested by Ms. Douglas, in that she received the report from Mr. Scott on the afternoon of the 7th February, 2023, and then unconfirmed information about her reassignment in the afternoon of the 8th February, 2023, it is certain nothing prevented her from taking some form of action on the report, or at bare minimum, bringing it to the attention of some other authority. We rejected the excuses proffered by Ms. Douglas to justify her inaction and found them to be spurious and vexatious. She gave no attention and showed complete disregard for the report.

We are convinced that if prudent action was taken by the REDO, there was more than sufficient time for effective fire prevention systems to have been put in place “in the interest of life and fire safety” as was concluded by Sub-Officer Ryan Scott in his report. We, in all the circumstances, consider the actions and inactions of the REDO to be careless, negligent, a complete dereliction of duties and falling far below the standard of officers serving the Education system of this country.

## **UNPREPAREDNESS AND INSUFFICIENCY OF RESOURCES OF MAHDIA FIRE STATION – GUYANA FIRE SERVICE**

This Commission considers that the duty officers and auxiliary firefighters provided the best possible response to the fire based on the circumstances they were confronted with at the Mahdia Fire Station on the evening of 21st May 2023. Be this as it may, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the Mahdia Fire Station, due to poor leadership at the highest level of the Guyana Fire Service, was unequipped and ill-prepared to provide an effective response to the fire at the dormitory. The non-provision of essential tools of trade for effective firefighting, especially where there are systems in place to access resources, is unacceptable and inexcusable. We are convinced that the state of affairs at Madhia Fire Station was the direct result of poor leadership of the Fire Service and lack of initiative.

## **UNPREPAREDNESS OF MAHDIA SECONDARY SCHOOL DORMITORY FOR EVENTUALITY OF A FIRE**

We observed that the language of the Ryan Scott report carried the singular emphasis of urgency. From the evidence before us, it became regrettably clear that this point was ignored since at the date of the fire, none of the recommendations contained in the Ryan Scott report had been complied with.

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Regrettably, despite this observation, the evidence of the witnesses appearing before us leads us to the finding that the Mahdia Secondary School dormitory was in a state of unpreparedness for the unfortunate tragedy which claimed the lives of 20 minors on the night of Sunday the 21st of May 2023. Though there was a single fire extinguisher in the building, the state of the dorm fell way below the standard of that which was contemplated by the Ryan Scott report.

## **SOCIAL, SOCIETAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES**

It is our finding that there was a substantial tension between the norms, rules, and regulations of dorm life with life in the villages. The relocation of students away from their communities, compounded with the absence of any permanent welfare officer and or guidance counsellor attached to the dormitory, aggravated a situation which was already challenging for both the house supervisor and the students.

We also found that the House Supervisors were not formally trained for their tasks, and certainly not trained to provide counselling and psychological support to the students who were at a vulnerable stage of their development and in dire need of this type of support.

Further, in the case of the female dormitory, there were too many students under the care of the House Supervisor to allow her to effectively provide proper care and supervision.

Our finding is that the students required greater care, supervision, and support than that which was provided.

## **EVENTS OF SUNDAY 21st MAY 2023**

We find that the fire was intentionally set after an altercation between a female student, the House Supervisor, and the Deputy Headmistress.

## **UNPREPAREDNESS OF THE MAHDIA HOUSE SUPERVISOR**

We find that the House Supervisors were untrained and unskilled in fire emergency evacuation techniques and had absolutely no plan to manage emergencies. There were no fire emergency and evacuation procedures in place, or at the very basic minimum, there was no-one else in the compound with keys to open the doors in the event of an emergency or even the keys to the doors being kept on a separate bunch for easy access. There was simply no emergency plan in place.

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# TERM OF REFERENCE #2

“Actions taken to provide swift care, medical attention and other forms of support and assistance to the injured and the families and relatives of the deceased.”





*Secretary to the COI – Mr. Javed Shaddick*

agencies under the Government of Guyana. Our reporting under this TOR is therefore limited to the response of those agencies to provide swift care and support following the tragedy. However, we remain cognizant that support came from across Guyana, from private sector, private citizens, neighbours and all those heroes who risked their lives to save the students. Many persons went above and beyond the call of duty and we wish to place on record our recognition of their heroism.

In pursuance of this term of reference, we recognized that all persons affected by the fire received immeasurable support and care. Such a response indicates that we are indeed our brother's keeper and reflects that at heart, we are one people. As we began our work, we therefore took a position to ensure every person or organization so interested had the opportunity to appear and testify on ways in which support was provided to those affected. The Secretary to the Commission made public calls for such persons to appear before the Commission. However, a response was only had from

## **RESPONSE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF GUYANA**

Our Commission received testimony from several officers and officials of the Government of Guyana who told us of the response from agencies within government to provide support to those affected immediately following the tragedy on 21st May, 2023. It is evident to us that this response was of a medical, psycho-social, logistical, psychiatric and financial nature, inter alia.

### ***Initial Response – Immediate Medical Evacuations***

Chief Pilot of Air Services Ltd., Captain Mohamed Yacoob Mazaharally Ally, appeared before us. He testified that in the early hours of 22nd May, 2023, he was contacted by the Commanding Officer of the Guyana Defence Force Air Corps and was told of the tragedy at the dormitory. He was told that his skill and experience in conducting night medical evacuations was needed to transport injured children to Georgetown. He explained that initially, he was hesitant to conduct the flight because night medical evacuations required a multi crew delegation due to the duties and risks involved in this kind of flight. Captain Ally was the only pilot available at the time to operate his Cessna 208 B single engine turbine Aircraft.

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We learnt from the Director of Operations for Roraima Airways, Captain Learie Barclay, that he was also contacted by government on 22nd May, 2023, and asked to conduct a night medical evacuation into Mahdia for injured persons. He explained that he arrived at the Eugene Correia International Airport, Ogle, at about 12:49a.m. He told us that shortly after, the Minister of Home Affairs, Hon. Robeson Benn, National Security Advisor, Captain Gerald Gouveia, and H.E. the President arrived at Ogle. By 1:15a.m. the aircraft was prepared and ready for departure. At about 2:00a.m., a medical team consisting of burn specialists and emergency unit medical professionals from the Georgetown Public Hospital Corporation (GPHC) arrived with medical supplies to be transported into Mahdia. We heard that as the team arrived, they were ushered on to the aircraft while the medical supplies were loaded by the President and the members of the Presidential Guard and they eventually departed Ogle. We are told that the Minister of Home Affairs, Hon. Robeson Benn was on this flight into Mahdia.



*Capt. Learie Barclay*

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Both Pilots lamented the inclement weather situation in Mahdia; Captain Barclay while enroute to Mahdia and while attempting to make a landing at the Mahdia Airstrip; and Captain Ally, grounded at the Mahdia Airstrip, described the weather as being cloudy and foggy thereby causing low visibility. Notwithstanding this, Captain Barclay explained that he was able to make a successful landing in Mahdia at about 3:05 a.m. He described the scene on the ground as confusing. There was a crowd of about 150 persons and a high police presence. He told us that at this time, he observed the Air Services Aircraft on the Airstrip being loaded with injured persons. That Air Services flight eventually departed with three of the injured students enroute to Ogle. They were accompanied by medical personnel.

Captain Barclay also told us that moments later, he observed that the Guyana Defence Force Skyvan made two unsuccessful attempts at landing, due to the degree of the fog and inclement weather. At about 5:45 a.m., injured persons were loaded onto Captain Barclay's aircraft by members of the medical team. He told us that one student was in such a state that her condition worsened, and they were forced to disembark her. This student was then intubated and reloaded onto the aircraft but had to be removed once more because of her condition. Eventually she was assisted on to the aircraft again and the Roraima Airways aircraft departed at about 6:26 a.m. At about 7:21 a.m. they arrived at Ogle. We understand that by this time, the Roraima Airways hangar had been completely transformed into an emergency operation centre with ambulances and medical support apparatus, supplies and workers occupying the space.

From all indications, the medical evacuations were successful, and the highest level of skill and considerations were employed. We commend the Pilots and their operations officers for braving inclement weather conditions and their display of courage in transporting the injured students. We are told by both Pilots that the flight experience was traumatic as the children were visibly in pain and in some instances moaning and screaming. Captain Ally told us of smelling what appeared to be burnt flesh and saw open wounds on the children. We observed that notwithstanding these circumstances, these Pilots at all times operated with a high level of care, patience, and dedication.

### ***Response***

It became apparent to us that the medical response to the tragedy was no single operation. Rather, it encompassed a medical operation utilizing medical professionals from all across Guyana and internationally, to ensure those injured received swift medical care. As regards the initial response from Georgetown, the medical team was headed by Dr. Shilindra Rajkumar, Head of General Surgery and Plastic and Burns Unit at the GPHC. He told us

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that sometime before midnight on 21st May, 2023, he received news of the tragedy from the Director of Medical and Professional Services, Dr. David Samaroo and was requested to organize a team to head into Mahdia and assess the situation and offer support. A team was mobilized comprising of Dr. Joseph Torres and Dr. Christopher Heywood from the Burns Unit and Dr. Charlyn Elliott and Nurse Shenella Thomas from the Emergency Room of GPHC. The team swiftly organized the necessary materials to respond to a mass casualty burn situation and then made their way to Ogle. Dr. Rajkumar told us that at Ogle they were received by the President who assisted with packing the supplies on to the aircraft. He also told us that by this time it was raining at Ogle. They soon departed for Mahdia.



Dr. Rajkumar told us that having arrived at Mahdia, they were transported in a Police vehicle to the Mahdia District Hospital where contact was made with the Regional Health Officer for Region 8, Dr. Doodnauth. After being appraised of the situation with the patients at the facility, he learnt that the most critical patients were already sent to the Airstrip to be transported to Georgetown for medical attention. He then assessed the medical condition of the patients at the Mahdia District Hospital. He told us that there were about 20 females receiving treatment. About 6 of them were in the actual treatment area with minor burns, 1 was in a separate room in an altered state of consciousness and the majority of them were in a restroom originally designated for Doctors and Nurses. There was also one female who was unresponsive and another female who was in a room by herself and that she sustained a lot of burns. The latter was fully conscious but in pain. He told us that she sustained burns to the back, both thighs, arm and chest. This patient we shall refer to as "MWX". He told us that from his assessment, MWX had sustained 40% deep burns. She subsequently was transferred to Staten Island Hospital, United States of America, on the 27th May and her case was managed by Dr. Michael Cooper. She was discharged on the 23rd August 2023 and returned home, in the company of Dr. Rajkumar and her parents, where she is under observation.

After the assessment of the students at the Mahdia District Hospital, Dr. Rajkumar and Dr. Torres left for the airstrip to make their own assessment of those students being loaded

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for departure. Those students, we are told, were sitting comfortably and were not in any immediate crisis. Based on this, Dr. Rajkumar determined that the patients should be transferred back to the hospital as there were students at the hospital who were in immediate need of medical evacuation. During this assessment, he determined that patients at the hospital were more critical than those who were about to depart for Georgetown. Accordingly, three of the more critical patients were taken to the airstrip, loaded on to the aircraft and transported to Georgetown for immediate medical attention.

Dr. Rajkumar told us that when he made the determination that the more critical patients should be transferred to Georgetown instead of the patients that were already loaded, there was a bit of resistance and commentary from persons at the airstrip. Nonetheless, Dr. Rajkumar followed his assessment and made the decision. We commend Dr. Rajkumar for standing by this decision based on his medical scholarship and experience. It is clear to us that Dr. Rajkumar and his team employed the highest level of medical skill and training to ensure the most critical received urgent care, while the less critical were also comfortable and received treatment. Dr. Rajkumar told us that once he went back to the hospital, he devised a plan for those present to receive treatment. He also informed the Commission of visits to the Mahdia Hospital by the President, Prime Minister and other Ministers. Dr. Rajkumar also informed the Commission that in his opinion he did not think any more could have been done by officials of Government, the medical and other emergency response teams to save lives.

### ***Travel & Accommodation***

We are told that all students who were in the female dormitory as well as their relatives residing in villages outside of the town of Mahdia were flown from their communities to Georgetown and given accommodation at various hotels and guest houses around Georgetown, while the students received treatment. We are told that these spaces were equipped with full access to medical, social and psychiatric support to help the relatives of those who survived and those who were grieving their loss. From all accounts, those accommodated were comfortable and well cared for. All travel, accommodation, medical and other expenses of the students and their families were fully covered by the Government of Guyana.

### ***Financial Response***

It was reported to us that following their accommodation in Georgetown after the tragedy, all families of those affected were provided with a sum of money to assist with their immediate needs outside of that which was already being provided. Based on the evidence of reports tendered before us, it is evident that a number of Government Ministries and Agencies provided direct financial support to individual families during the period immediately after

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the fire and thereafter. We are told that the Government assigned a Minister to each grieving family, whose responsibility was to personally ensure that the assigned families were coping and their needs were being met.

### ***Agreement for financial assistance***

Ms. Shoshanna Lall, Attorney-at-Law of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, appeared before us to inform the Commission of the agreement for financial assistance executed by and on behalf of those affected by the fire. She testified that she was part of a team that assisted the Hon. Attorney General in drafting an agreement that formed the basis of financial assistance to the victims and their families. The witness stated that legal advice and research were provided to the Cabinet – and it was pursuant to the research and advice that she and her team were given instructions to draft the agreements.

She reported that having received approval of the agreement, she and a team led by the Hon. Attorney General thereafter visited Mahdia and engaged with the families. The witness testified that the engagement took the form of a meeting with the group, then individual meetings with each family. She stated that they went through very carefully each line of the agreement systematically. The parents were provided with an independent Counsel with whom they had the opportunity to consult privately before executing the agreement.

The witness testified that some of the families spoke in their native Patamona language and therefore the engagements always had a translator translating for such persons. We are told that at no time was there any pressure, intimidation or force used to execute the said agreements and that it was done based on the free will of those who received the assistance.

Ms. Lall further stated that she then prepared a report based on the agreement of the financial assistance provided and the independent advice that was tendered to the families and to the number of persons who received the assistance. Financial assistance was disaggregated in the following terms: -

1. \$5,000,000 for families of the deceased;
  2. \$3,000,000 for those who were severely injured; and
  3. \$500,000 for those victims who suffered minor injuries.
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### *Funeral Expense*

We were told during hearings that all those who perished in the fire received a dignified funeral service and burial, the expenses for which were fully covered by the Government of Guyana. We also heard during testimonies that several wakes, vigils and reflection services were held in honour of the memory of those who died in the fire. These engagements are commendable as we consider them to be of extreme importance as they provided added opportunities for those in grief to receive love and be comforted by those concerned.



### *Psychosocial Support*

We recognize that the events of 21st May, 2023 were traumatizing. In this regard, the actions of those involved in the response of the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security are noted. Ms. Levine Mercedes Gouveia, Social Worker from the (MHSSS) testified that upon receipt of the news of the fire on 22nd May 2023, the Ministry immediately responded by identifying three of their officers, Ms. Mansfield, Mr. Justim Mounter, and Psychologist, Dr. Beekhoo to travel into Madhia because they recognized that a crisis of this magnitude would need expertise.

Over the days following the tragedy, the Ministry conducted a series of interventions, including grief therapy for the parents of the deceased. Teams were set up at Kanuku Suites and Signature Inn in Georgetown for conducting therapy sessions with parents and family members of the students who were staying at the said hotels.

The Ministry's officers also carried out hospital visits twice per day and visited students in the critical care unit and the Children's Ward at the Georgetown Public Hospital. Counselling was done and support, in the form of hampers, were also provided by the Ministry. Professional support of the Ministry was also extended to the community members in Mahdia including the police, the health workers, teachers, and anyone who needed an intervention.

## FINDINGS -TOR 2

### *Mahdia District Hospital*

Dr. Rajkumar told us that the hospital at Mahdia did not have an operating theatre and therefore no emergency surgeries could be performed on any of the patients. He described the hospital as a single flat facility with a treatment room with a capacity of about 6 beds. There were also 2 smaller areas which were considered wards with about 2 to 3 beds. The Covid-19 isolation unit was transformed into an emergency unit during the tragedy since there were issues of space.

Apart from the Regional Health Officer, there were two (2) other doctors from Mahdia who were on duty and provided response to the tragedy. We are told that all the nurses in the town came out to add to the response. In total, there were about 11 medical personnel from the Mahdia District Hospital who responded to the tragedy. We understand that these professionals were overwhelmed as they were operating at over 24 hours without rest.

It is essential for this Commission to commend the medical response of the Regional Health Officer and all the medical professionals under his charge. With limited resources and very little space, the nurses and doctors gave their best effort to provide medical support to the injured children. While their effort is worthy of acknowledgement, we note that they were overwhelmed by the tragedy. As was stated by Dr. Shilindra Rajkumar in his evidence, the situation was a lot more than these medical professionals were accustomed to or were prepared for. Indeed, nothing could have prepared them for the magnitude of this tragedy.

### *Medical Response –Professional, Efficient & Effective*

There is no doubt in our minds that following the events of 21st May, 2023, the highest standard of medical care and treatment was provided to all those requiring such. In all instances medical personnel were professional, patient, efficient and utilized their skill and training to ensure those receiving treatment were comfortable and those concerned were at ease. This is a plus for the medical and health care system in this country as the effort of these personnel can only best be described as heroic. A debt of gratitude is therefore owed to every medical professional who provided some form of care to the children directly involved in the fire, in their time of despair as well as to those who suffered from the effects of the tragedy.

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### ***Psychosocial Support – Professional, Efficient & Effective***

We find that the psychosocial and psychiatric support offered through the Ministries of Health and Human Services and Social Security were professional and effective. In all circumstances, we heard that such support catered to the direct needs of not only survivors, but community members and responders.

However, during our visit to the communities of Karisparu, Chenapau, Micobie, Campbelltown and the Madhia Secondary School, it was reported to us that there is still a great need for Psychosocial Support and Therapy to be extended to the families and relatives of the deceased and to students of the Madhia Secondary School.

### ***Financial Response***

It is evident that a significant amount of money was expended by the Government of Guyana to provide an effective response. These efforts are commendable and served to reduce the effects of the tragedy.

With respect to the agreements for financial assistance, we note that no value of money can ever replace a life or limb, let alone a child with so much hope, dreams and aspirations. We are of the view, however, that the sum \$5,000,000 (Five million dollars) distributed to families of the deceased persons was sufficient. We also find that the sum at the upper scale \$3,000,000 (Three million dollars) dispensed to those who suffered physical injury was also sufficient.

This Commission, however, was not satisfied with the method of disbursement of the said sum of \$3,000,000 (Three million dollars). Some students with minor physical injuries either received assistance at the lower end of the scale (which is five hundred thousand dollars) or nothing at all. Further, students without any physical injuries did not receive lump sum assistance. We find it unfortunate that every female student involved in the fire on the evening of 21st May 2023 did not receive financial assistance at the upper end of the scale.

We note that, in many instances, the fire has had a traumatic effect on the survivors, inclusive of dorm parents. While they may not wear physical scars, the mental and emotional scarring are just as important. The experience of the fire has certainly impacted the mental health of many survivors. Many of them required psychiatric evaluation and continue to require treatment and support to grapple with the traumatizing effects of the tragedy.

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# TERM OF REFERENCE #3

“Make such recommendations and observations as the Commission may deem fit, including such measures and actions that the Commission may consider necessary and appropriate to prevent the recurrence of such tragedy.”



The Mahdia tragedy occurred because a single female student of the Mahdia Secondary School set the dormitory on fire. That student is being processed through the criminal justice system.

That apart, we view the tragedy as a result of the culmination of a number of systemic flaws in policy implementation, compounded by inefficiencies in management, and acts of negligence by certain officials. These were manifested in the circumstances that led to the tragedy and in the events that unfolded on the night of 20th May, 2023.

Our observations in this Report seek to examine the root causes of this type of deviant behaviour, and to make recommendations for a whole of society approach to preventing the recurrence of such a tragedy.

### ***Context of Policy Implementation***

When the APNU-AFC government took office in 2015, the Minister of Education, Dr. Rupert Roopnarine was mandated by the Cabinet on 11th November, 2015 to establish a Commission of Inquiry into the Education Sector of Guyana. The General Objectives were to establish a Base Line analysis of the State of Public Education in Guyana; and recommend broad Strategic Guidelines for the enhancement of public education.

In its Preliminary Report (to be referred to as the Caesar COI), the Caesar COI listed a number of Observations and Recommendations that pointed to issues that reflected fundamental flaws in the Education Sector. Among these were: a lack of integrity, negative attitudes, egoism, lack of consultation with teachers on the ground, lack of respect for teachers by officers who supervised them, and the lack of care and concern by officers in the execution of their duties.

### ***Issue # 1 - Need for quality staff to be assigned to remote locations.***

There is a reluctance for persons to take up appointments in the hinterland because of the nature and impact, of such postings on family life, relatively low salaries and allowances, the quality of teachers' living quarters, the stress of the high span of control - ratio of teacher to students and dormitory parent to dormitory students, and length of time for actions to be forthcoming.

The paucity and, in many cases, the quality of teaching staff, directly impact on the system, quality, and delivery of education, and on the motivation of the staff and students in many remote hinterland locations.

If the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development through its Regional Education Committees cannot resolve the challenges in the recruitment of suitably trained and motivated staff including dormitory staff, then the delivery of quality education and adequate care and supervision of children will continue to be in jeopardy.

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### ***Recommendations***

The Commission recommends that every effort be made to ensure that the education policy implementation is in the hands of competent professionals and that the facilities in the schools and dormitories and the management of same, will assure that the students are receiving quality education in an environment conducive to learning, child development, and inculcation of social values and behavioral patterns.

Parents have an important role to play in the upbringing of the children. They must be included in the consultation process and necessary arrangements put in place to facilitate information flow: child - parent, and parent – teacher.

### ***Issue # 2 - School Dormitories and Management of same***

The CEO of the Ministry of Education Mr. Hussein in his evidence expressed that “dorms did not become what they were in 2020. It was a long period of neglect which positioned the dorms to where they were in 2020”. The CEO pointed out that a decision was made in 2020 that one of the first things to be done in relation to the 2021-2025 Education Sector Plan, was to look at the state of the dorms. This decision led to the Ministry of Education commissioning a consultancy report by Deen Partners, funded by UNICEF, and titled “Gender Sensitive Standards for Dormitory Schools in Guyana”. The final draft of this report was submitted to the MOE on 22th May, 2022 and accordingly provided a frame of reference for the retrofitting of the existing twenty-four (24) dormitories in Guyana, and a template for any new dormitories to be built.

### ***Recommendations***

The Commission recommends that as far as practicably possible the recommendations of the MOE/UNICEF Gender Sensitive Standards for Dormitory Schools in Guyana Report be implemented.

That an Inspectorate be set up to visit the dormitories which have been, or are being retrofitted, in order to determine the extent to which these are in compliance with the recommended Gender Sensitive Standards for Dormitories. This should also apply to dormitories for intended construction. The visits should allow for the inspection of fire suppression systems, emergency evacuation procedures, and assessment of first responder fire-fighting drills and capabilities.

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Compliance with the statutory schedules for fire drills at schools and dormitories must also be monitored and enforced.

We recommend that technically competent individuals are included in such inspectorate teams, and reports on the extent of compliance achieved are to be submitted to the relevant agencies for evaluation and follow-up action.

We recommend that grills should be replaced with a modern security system, inclusive of secured fencing and cameras which will ensure a secure environment and assist in monitoring the entry and exit of all persons using the facilities.

### ***Issue # 3***

The Caesar COI in its Report - paragraph 4.4.38, recommended that the state of dormitories must be addressed, and that attention must be paid to the level and quality of supervisors. It was reported that in general, 'House Parents' are not trained for their tasks, have too many students to overlook and students are taking advantage of them. It was specifically noted that "most of these schools are secondary schools where teenagers are experiencing the most challenging times of their life" and greater care and supervision were necessary.

MOE/UNICEF Gender Sensitive Standards for Dormitory Schools in Guyana Report provided a recommended ratio of supervisors to children to ensure effective management and supervision of the students under the care of the house parents and supervisors.

### ***Recommendations***

We recommend continuous training for House Parents and Supervisors. The training must include training in evacuation procedures and the use of fire alarms and fire-fighting appliances.

Further, we recommend that the ratio of supervisors to children in accordance with the MOE/UNICEF Gender Sensitive Standards for Dormitory Schools in Guyana Report be implemented. This will provide more effective supervision and support to the students under the care of the supervisors.

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***Issue # 4 – The appropriateness of the design for schools and dormitories in the hinterland - enhancing cultural identity and uniqueness while ensuring functionality.***

According to paragraph 4.4.21 of the Caesar COI Report, the recommendation was made “for arrangements to be put in place for some department /unit of the Ministry of Education to have responsibility for ‘School Design’. Such will ensure that minimum standards are considered, and special attention should be given to the construction of schools in the Hinterland. Every effort must be made to have ‘local experts’ involved in some of the critical decisions including ventilation”. In most Amerindian communities, the “Circle” has deep ancestral and cultural significance. It conveys the meaning of the Circle of Life, of communal values, and egalitarianism. The sharpness of rectangular design and lack of flexibility in movement of furniture, and of occupants’ space, as evident in the conventional coastal buildings, contrast with the circular design of the benab (a meeting place, facilitating communal conversations, and sharing of food, cultural dances, etc). Dormitories and dining halls should be user- friendly and give occupants a sense of a shared common space, while respecting the need for privacy and functionality.

***Recommendations***

The Mahdia COI endorses the Caesar Report observation and recommends that there be full consultations with the stakeholders – students, teachers and communities to ensure that cultural, spiritual, and social values are incorporated in design of schools, dormitories and dining halls, so that relocation of students from their community and family to another environment, will not be traumatic and will enhance and motivate students to enjoy their space, while ensuring they are imbued with a sense of responsibility for self-management, team work and social-cohesiveness.

***Issue # 5 - Promotion of an enhanced relationship among Students in Dormitories, their Parents, and Staff and Creating an environment of caring, social cohesion and character development in the schools and dormitories***

During our visits, parents in remote villages reported to us that, prior to the Mahdia tragedy, they were not as well informed of their children’s activities at the Mahdia Secondary School and dormitories, and of their academic performance, health and wellbeing. There are several female survivors of the Mahdia Fire who are now attending the President’s College. Representation was made by their parents for more frequent updates about their academic, health and emotional progress.

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### ***Recommendations***

The Commission recommends that for those students now attending the President's College, the students' Welfare Officers should have the responsibility for facilitating regular contact between students and their parents. Students attending the College, like those housed in dormitories of other secondary schools in the Hinterland, are distant from their own communities and away from their parents and extended families for months until the end of term. It is important that parents and their children remain in touch by way of the most efficient and cost-effective communication systems, with built in safeguards to ensure that the children are not susceptible to the negative influences of social media and face abuse of one kind or another. The cost of providing such a facility must be budgeted for by the relevant Ministry since the parents in remote communities can ill afford to shoulder such costs. It is also recommended that facilities be made available in the dormitory compounds for in transit accommodation for visiting parents and for a private space for parent-child interaction. Further, we also recommend that Welfare Officers and Counsellors be assigned to schools in the Hinterland so that they can be available to provide counselling services to students and to be the link between parents and students.

### ***Issue # 6 - Social Cohesion and Socialization through Counselling, Games and other Community-Oriented Activities***

The Acting Deputy Headmistress (DHM) of the Mahdia Secondary School, Mrs Amanda Peters-Nedd, in her testimony to the Mahdia COI, stated that she undertook to provide care and guidance and counselling for both the male and female students who were staying at the dorms. She pointed out that from the time she was appointed in March 2022 to the time of the tragedy, there was no Welfare Officer and no Guidance and Counselling Officer at the Mahdia Secondary School nor in the entire Region 8. There was also the absence of after-school programmes. "Being at the dormitory, it was a routine for the children at Mahdia to really just get up, have breakfast, go to school, come back in the afternoon, eat, just be in their rooms and then they come out for study period. There was no programme for them as to where they play some games. Request for games equipment was never addressed except for a few footballs." She expressed that sporting activities can be used as a means of instilling principles of discipline and socialization to students. We also heard that there was no regular viewing of the television except when films were provided by the DHM through means of a flash drive. This environment influenced the behaviour pattern of some female students who experimented with marijuana, vape, viewed pornographic material on their cellphones, experienced hallucinations, and manifested deviant traits.

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### ***Recommendations***

The need for resident Welfare Officers and persons trained in Guidance and Counselling is highly recommended, particularly for schools in the Hinterland, and those with Dormitories where teenage students are undergoing the life changing experiences and emotions, and in environments where they are away from their loved ones and their communities. It is evident that these students need to be cared for and counselled because they are particularly vulnerable to the lure of money and grooming by unscrupulous adults.

Because of the cultural diversity among students, it is recommended that in addition to the appointed house parents, dormitory staff should include mature men and women drawn from the students' home communities who can be assigned on a rotating basis, to always continue the cultural education of the students so they do not lose contact with their cultural and community values.

### ***Issue #7 - Continuing Medical Monitoring and Treatment, Counselling and Therapy sessions for those students, staff and persons directly affected by the tragedy***

Our Commission, during the hearings and interactions with the communities during field visits, received information from persons who are still traumatized after the tragedy. There are students, male and female, who survived, and were not physically injured but are emotionally scarred as a consequence of the impact of the tragedy. While such support services were extended for a six-month period, the requests have been poignant and deserve attention.

### ***Recommendations***

It is recommended by the Commission that the record of persons who were interviewed and who were diagnosed as requiring therapy and counselling, be revisited. Periodic contact should be made with the Community Health Workers in the Communities from where students originated and a list made of those who still are in need of such support. It may be necessary to have the therapists and counsellors actually assigned to the community for periods of time, perhaps on a rotational basis.

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### ***Issue # 8 - Number of Male Students from the Mahdia Male Dormitory not at School***

The proximity of the Male and Female Dormitories at Mahdia, the mobilization of male students from the Dormitory to be involved in first responder firefighting and search and rescue operation on that fateful night, and the fact that many of the male and female students were from the same families and communities, impacted on many of the male students. Some are in need of counselling and therapy. Others are unwilling to return to school and especially if they have to live at the Mahdia Male Dormitory. Parents approached the Commission for guidance because they want their boys to return to school.

#### ***Recommendations***

The Commission in its interaction on Wednesday, 1st November, 2023 at Mahdia met with some of the parents and community leaders. Present were the Deputy Regional Executive Officer, Mr Britton, and the District Education Officer, Mr David. The Commission requested these two officials to follow up on this matter and to seek guidance from their functional superiors at the central Ministries (MLGRD and MOE).

The Commission recommends that consideration be given for the placement of male students who have not returned to the Mahdia Secondary School, to be housed in Mahdia at their relatives' homes, or for the RDC Region 8 to identify accommodation in Mahdia or Campbelltown where the male students can be housed, so that they can return to school. The third option is to consult with the parents of the students on whether relocation to another residential school in Region 8 (Kato or Paramakatoi) will be an acceptable solution.

### ***Issue # 9***

The Commission is aware that numerous individuals and agencies rallied during and after the tragedy to respond, above and beyond the call of duty, to the efforts of rescue and recovery of the students of the female dormitory, medical evacuation, medical treatment, therapy, counselling, and the welfare and well-being of all those affected by the tragedy.

#### ***Recommendations***

The Commission recommends that these persons and agencies be commended for their heroic services and for their humanity. Such commendations should include the assistance received from overseas.

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### ***Issue # 10***

We recognized from our hearings that there were certain individuals and officials who showed exceptional duty and dedication to service. Leading this category is perhaps Sub-Officer Ryan Scott of the Guyana Fire Service. It is certain that junior ranks can benefit from many of the traits exemplified by this officer.

### ***Recommendations***

The Commission recommends these persons be commended and if possible, shown some form of reward, for their work and dedication. In the case of Ryan Scott, we recommend his service to the Guyana Fire Service be considered fitting for some form of promotion in the Fire Service and a national award. We recognize the latter is at the discretion of His Excellency.

### ***Issue # 11***

The tragic loss of lives of twenty children in the fire at the Mahdia Female Dormitory is a traumatic event in the nation's history and more so for the relatives of the deceased. The pain of loss and silent grief will always be felt but efforts can be made to assuage such an emotional experience by an act of Remembrance dedicated to the deceased.

### ***Recommendations***

The Commission recommends that a suitable Memorial be erected on the site of the female Dormitory. Such a Memorial can be in the form of a Benab for quiet study, reflection, and meditation, with the area of the female Dorm Parent's room being converted into a Shrine with a plaque inscribed with the names of the twenty deceased students.

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# IN LOVING MEMORY

