

Deaths At Freeport Container Port Cry Out For Justice

They pay us twenty-five cents per container on importation and twenty-five cents on exportation but we've (taxpayers) been burdened with paying all the customs and immigration officers' overtime charges, which they've been incurring, over these many years. Now they have the audacity to talk about pulling up stakes and leaving town (after we've given them everything) because of the flack they've been getting, recently, over their alleged carelessness in the deaths of the three young Bahamians? It's Blackmail! That is the kind of rotten deal Hubert Ingraham sealed with the now infamous Freeport Container Port. When Ingraham made the deal with Beijing's Hutchison Whampoa in this Container Port project, he sold the birthright of every single Bahamian - past present and future - down the drain. The FCP principals were given all they asked of Hubert - and then some - but they've reneged on all the core principals of the agreement; delivering nothing they promised him, in return, for all the concessions he allowed them.

The negotiations went similar to what I imagine it would be like if someone was holding a 45 revolver to your head while counting from one to ten and promising to blow your brains out if, when they got to ten, you had not completed signing papers, giving over control of all your worldly assets to them. The FCP principals - experienced as they are in negotiating very selfishly - proposed in theory (for Ingraham's benefit) that they would build a container port; deepen the Freeport Harbour; develop an Air/Sea, mega import/export warehousing facility. They also promised to bring 'Home Porting' of cruise ships to Grand Bahama; the idea being that cruise ship owners would establish their base of operations in Freeport, and instead of passengers flying in from all over the world to Miami/Ft. Lauderdale/Puerto Rico to catch their cruises, they would, instead, fly into Freeport, creating a tremendous hub of business activity and opportunities here for all of us. This particular aspect of the agreement, if it materialized, would have meant big, big business for Freeport - no question about that.

Whampoa, at the behest of Hubert Ingraham, also reluctantly, as told, agreed to assume ownership of the Lucayan Beach hotel strip (huge mistake) and promised Ingraham to develop a "Mecca" of sorts which, to date, like all their other broken promises, has not materialized. It was stipulated in the agreement, in addition, that a quality international airport, operating 24 hour-a-day service, would be established and maintained, here in the city.

I am of the view that the owners of Hutchison Whampoa and the Freeport Container Port, were only interested, in the first place, in establishing the Container Port and acquiring as much interest in the ownership of the Grand Bahama Port Authority as they possibly could. They had no interest in operating hotels on Grand Bahama. And if we were not so naïve and blind, politically, we would remember when they told Ingraham as much, in no uncertain terms. They agreed to the hotel operation, only after Ingraham pleaded and urged on them to get involved on the Lucayan Beach strip and then they only agreed on condition that the government secures its own casino operator. They wanted nothing to do with the casino operations. They told the amateur negotiator (Hubert Ingraham) that there would be no compromise on that particular score. In other words, they only agreed to develop the “Our Lucaya Resort” to set Ingraham up for blackmail for everything else they really wanted. Is there any wonder or surprise then that we see Ingraham pleading with Sir Jack Hayward - almost to the point of begging him - to agree to sell his shares, in the Port Group of companies, to Hutchison-Whampoa?

The Chinese investors were particularly keen on getting Ingraham to agree to have Bahamian taxpayers foot the bill for the overtime payments to Customs and Immigration Officers for services rendered, by them to the container port, after normal working hours. They claimed, during their ‘negotiations’, that if the government insisted on them absorbing customs and immigration officers’ overtime fees, there would be no container port. Ingraham, of course, fell for the oldest negotiating and blackmailing trick in their book and agreed to have us taxpayers burdened with that huge yearly payout; an expensive commitment, indeed.

Can you imagine the amounts of overtime payments made to customs and immigration officers, from the consolidated fund over the years, since the inception of that container port? It is no wonder then that Ingraham and Laing couldn’t wait to punish those officers with the introduction of the shift system which is not working and which will never work. I have already advised the PLP’s platform committee that the PLP, as the next government, should commit to revisiting this asinine decision for the purpose of revising the same. Some have opined that talking business with these particular investors, in an effort to consummate an arrangement which would be mutually beneficial to both parties, was both naïve, amateurish of Hubert Ingraham and a big mistake on his and his government’s part, in the first place. We are not in

their league when it comes to negotiating, in bad faith, with a straight face.

Bahamians should know that when the time came for them to deliver on the commitments they made, after having gotten a full package of concessions from the FNM, including the absorption of customs and immigration officers' overtime payments; they began back-peddalling and finding all sorts of excuses as to why they could not deliver.

In the case of the 'Home-porting' aspect of the agreement, for instance, they reneged and informed Ingraham that the cruise line operators considered the \$15 departure tax, per passenger, too high but would agree to go ahead, provided the government accede, further, to establishing a special preferential tariff regime for all passengers departing the country from Freeport airport and or harbour. The rate Ingraham agreed was \$12 instead of the \$15 per head, as required by law, but despite this agreed, I submit, illegal payback (rebate) FCP still failed to live up to their part of the bargain and nothing they committed to in the agreement materialized.

Ingraham arbitrarily approved to rebate them the \$3 per passenger through some back door method. He decided to treat the give back as a rebate, as defined in the country's financial rules, as opposed to attempting to have parliament pass an unconstitutional, discriminatory and therefore illegal amendment to the departure tax act, to provide for this special incentive. Whatever the procedure is that Ingraham is using, through the ministry of tourism, to get this discounted amount back into the pockets of the Chinese from the consolidated fund cannot, in my opinion, withstand the legal acid test.

Rebates, refunds and or remissions allowed, under law and within the legal parameters of a department of government (in this case the ministry of tourism) and in conjunction with the country's financial rules, pertain exclusively to "amounts due and payable but rebated under some very special legal circumstances; but never willy-nilly." The law, indeed, provides for each passenger leaving the country, for a port outside Bahamian jurisdiction, to be required to pay a departure tax of \$15 per person, not \$12; so there can be no legal bases for a case to be made, to the public treasury, by Hubert Ingraham minister for finance, even, for this rebate.

This is an illegal waiver of government's revenue which Ingraham - in and of himself as minister of finance - under the country's financial rules and laws of the land, is not empowered by parliament to grant and therefore has no authority to approve; so the tax waiver being given, in this case I submit, is being granted illegally. Besides, this rebate was supposedly allowed to facilitate 'Home Porting' of cruise liners which has not, to date, happened as yet so where is the money going, Mr. Ingraham, and who is benefiting? Someone needs to account to us taxpayers for this abuse of public funds.

What makes me angry as hell is the fact that we've gone overboard to accommodate these people; even when they wanted more, more, more and still more; and yet after giving them everything we possibly could, they still work our citizens to the bone, like slaves and under slave-like conditions. Plainly and simply the work environment at the container port is very dangerous, to say the least. There never existed - it appears from its inception - the kind of conditions that "safety-conscious" persons would readily allow themselves to be exposed too except under duress. There are still few safety measures in place, I am told, which could never be remotely regarded as adequate for the protection of workers, and the few that are in place, I am further told, are not operational most of the time.

It seems that Chinese businesses, as a rule, pay little attention to matters of this kind and they have a very cavalier attitude toward prioritized protection of their employees. For them the overall welfare and safety of their employees, while on the job, seems to be secondary. Ninety nine percent of the almost 800 employees are temporary workers who enjoy no job benefits whatsoever and what is so ironic is the fact that they have been working as temporary workers for years. Our labour laws provide, I am assured, for automatic permanency for workers after six months on the job, so pray tell me what law is it that exempts the Freeport Container Port?

I am very concerned for those employees who, despite the possible dangers of working at that facility, perform their duties, nonetheless, without the comfort of knowing that they are fully covered with health and other insurances, in case of an unfortunate accident. I note, and I

stand to be corrected, that even after their apparent negligence in causing the deaths of those three young citizens, the container port's compensatory gestures toward the families, left behind to suffer, were few if any at all. These people appear to be telling us (not in so many words, however) that those deaths go with the territory and they seem to be asking us, silently albeit - what the hell are you'all so disturbed about; three people dying is no big deal. Well, it's a big deal to us.

Well we hear rumblings now of FCP threatening to dismantle the facility; pack it up - and their bags too - and leave town. This is another of their blackmailing tactics. We are told that the public's outrage over the apparent negligence of that operation, with particular emphasis on the cause of the accident that claimed the lives of our three young citizens, has gotten to them and they have already shared their feelings with Bahamian and Port officials. It is said that they've expressed their disgust in no uncertain terms and have advised that unless people and agencies in the country desist from badgering them, they are prepared to shut down their operations and take flight. I am outraged at this attitude; this is blackmail of the highest order - plain and simple - and we shouldn't tolerate this from them. This is all Hubert Ingraham's doing and he is to be blamed for this Chinese 'anvil' around our necks. We were quite happy supporting Taiwan, during the PLP's term in office, but Ingraham came and changed all that. He treated Taiwan with such undeserved disdain and disrespect, on coming to office, when he dumped them so unceremoniously in favour of this communist taskmaster. I knew it was a mistake then and I am more convinced today that Ingraham erred badly in doing so. As for me, personally, I couldn't care less if the Chinese left tomorrow. For my part, they should not have been allowed to invest to this degree in the country in the first place. Chinese business, I say again, profits us nothing; no one benefits from their investments except themselves; the Taiwanese were a different lot. I say to Bahamar and the Bahamian people - beware. They are zealous of making money and the sanctity of human life mean little or nothing to them. They are not a bit concerned by the deaths of those three young Bahamian martyrs; their obvious attitude? People die everyday; it's a part of living, so why all the fuss over three souls dying in an accident? That is the attitude, I perceive, of those slave masters who control management at the Freeport Container Port. The innocent blood, though, of our young men cries out from the ground for justice and I wish to know when will the tyrants be made to pay? Who will make them pay?

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