

Both Freeport's International Airport and the Container Port are owned and operated by Hutchison Whampoa, and Hutchison Whampoa is owned out of Beijing, China. Chinese - as investors go - are unique in the world, in that they care more for China's position on the world stage, 1000 years from now, than any hundred people who might die in accidents at their facilities, anywhere around the globe.

The truth of the matter is, in my opinion, is that these people don't give a damn about people dying tragically and they certainly don't give two hoots about the three young Bahamians, who died, in that tragic accident, at their port facility, here in Freeport recently. If that accident had claimed ten or twenty, or even a hundred lives, it really would have mattered very little to them. Their attitude? Just replace the three; the ten; the twenty; or the hundred, and let the church roll on. The scene in China's Tiananmen Square, several years ago, still lingers in my mind. I am reminded, very vividly, of how little value they seem to place on human life. We are all able to recall, I am sure, when and how Beijing's government ordered the heavy equipment onto Tiananmen Square and instructed the operators of the equipment to run over and crush their own people to death, if they failed to stop their demonstrations and remove themselves from the square; what was their crime? Demonstrating, peacefully, for their God given basic human rights.

Our summary investigation, into the recent tragic accident - contrary to Vernae Grant's and Hubert Ingraham's conclusions - reveals that the container port's safety measures - whatever they are - were flawed. They were flawed, not only from the standpoint of being very limited in scope, but also from the cavalier attitude with which senior executives undertook adherence to the implementation and cautious exercise of those limited safety measures. Our preliminary conclusions found that, notwithstanding the government's failure to ensure that the Freeport Met office remained open and manned when the Port Authority announced its closure effective the end of December 2009 (and there is blame to be put there as well), the container port was, in fact, advised by Vopak, well in advance, about the weather pattern heading for Freeport and therefore is to be jointly blamed, with Earl Deveaux, Hubert Ingraham and the government, for the deaths of those young Bahamians.

I am advised, further, that Vopak informed the container port officials and told

them that they, themselves, had taken the cautious decision to close their port, lock down their operations and leave before the weather hit. But the Container Port, whose only interest seems to be dollars and cents, did not come down on the side of caution and followed Vopak's lead, but instead ordered those men and women back to work, thus exposing them to the dangers of that ravaging tornado which claimed those lives and injured many others. This was a very foolish and unwise decision for the principals to have taken and they ought to be made to pay for the lost lives and traumatized others.

I cannot imagine what other information the FNM MP for the eight mile rock constituency, Mrs. Verna Grant and her leader Hubert Ingraham, could have gotten that the PLP delegation didn't get, that would have facilitated them in concluding, definitively, that the operators at the container port used their best judgment in this situation and were not to be blamed in any way, for the deaths of those young men.

Three young souls are dead tonight and their families are grieving (for God's sake) and all we could hear from Verna Grant is that she is fully satisfied that the container port did nothing wrong and followed by her leader, Hubert Ingraham, singing the same tune? It appears to me -and I could be wrong because I've been wrong before - that both Ingraham and Grant and the entire FNM Grand Bahama bunch, for that matter, are in bed with Hutchison; that in their book, Hutchison Whampoa can't ever do anything wrong. Let us not forget, now, that Hubert Ingraham is hell bent on, and has been for sometime, convincing Sir Jack to sell his shareholdings, in the Port Authority, to Hutchison Whampoa. Remember? So what's up with that? Doesn't this all look very suspicious? Why are the FNM prime minister and the FNM MP for the Eight Mile Rock constituency so keen on protecting Hutchison Whampoa at all cost in this matter? Why?

I was flabbergasted, to say the least, when I discovered that, in this age of computer technology, these men and women employees, of this container port, who are obliged to work in such a dangerous work environment, work there without medical insurance. This is a hardhat work environment and medical insurance ought to be a very basic minimum requirement, of the company, for all its employees.

My information is that all FCP employees engaged after 1999 are not covered

with medical insurance by the company and that, my friends, is a damn shame and disgrace. The container port, by virtue of the potential dangers that exist there, ought to have been required, at the time of agreement by the Ingraham Administration, to include comprehensive health insurance coverage for all its employees - permanent and otherwise - and I repeat, all of them without exception.

What we discovered, as well and found very disturbing, is the fact that approximately eighty percent or a little more than 600 of the 800 employees (99% of whom are Bahamians), at that facility, are temporary workers. To date many of them have been working temporarily for more than three years. The father of one of the young men, who succumbed as a result of the accident, told the media that his son was working, as a temporary employee, for more than three years. I believe this contravenes our labour laws in that the law, as I am advised by the labour department here in Freeport, provides for employees to be considered temporary for no longer than a maximum of six months. They told me, as well, that after six months working on any job, in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas under law, one is automatically considered a permanent employee. If this is so, then how is it that the container port (Hutchison Whampoa - Ingraham's favourite remember?) is allowed to work 80% of its employees not covered by insurance; they have no benefits and they have no permanence on the job whatsoever? Did you - Hubert Ingraham - grant your friends at Hutchison Whampoa exemption from obeying that aspect of the law, as well?

Earl Deveaux, as minister responsible for the met office nationally, should also share part of the blame for the untimely deaths of these three young men. Representing his FNM government, he should have moved rapidly to staff the office here in Freeport, simultaneously, with the close out of operations as announced, by the Grand Bahama Port Authority, for the effective date of December 2009. There ought not to have been lull or delay in doing so and the government should not have allowed a cease in the operations to actually occur.

I've seen a letter which was written to Hubert Ingraham, by a former employee of the, now closed, Freeport met office warning of the dangers of allowing the said office to remain closed indefinitely. The letter was dated 22nd March 2010, one full week prior to that deadly accident but, as usual for Hubert Ingraham, the contents of the letter was given no priority status, no doubt treated very lightly and filed away in the garbage bin. This is not good governance; this is not "trusted" governance; this is dangerous; it's mediocrity; it's neglect and it is a damn shame and disgrace for a so-called responsible government.

Someone or some persons must be made to pay for the deaths of those three young Bahamians, and for the suffering that their families will have to now endure. We all know that if this had happened anywhere in the United States of America, a lawsuit would have been initiated, by now, against both the company and the government agency involved in the mess-up. The families should now come together (if they have not done so already) and prepare to sue both Hutchison Whampoa and the FNM government. This ought not to be allowed to be swept under the FNM's political carpet.

NEMA has been dismantled by the Ingraham government, as well, and so that agency was not operational during the time of the accident and therefore could not perform the vital services, to the affected families, for which it was designed and set up by Perry Christie's PLP government in the first place. NEMA's mandate is to take the lead in preparing citizens, residents and guests, alike, well in advanced of any impending dangers from possible natural disasters and to aid them in coping in the aftermath of any natural disaster.

It's a comprehensive role NEMA has to play, providing Counselling and other social services to the injured and traumatized. Because Ingraham had the agency dismantled, after taking office leaving only one young lady employed, I am told, to answer the phone, none of those services were available prior to or after the recent tornados that struck. I daresay that, as it is structured and operated in the Freeport area, this container port would never be allowed to operate anywhere in the United States of America.

Sir Lynden Oscar Pindling, former prime minister of The Bahamas now deceased, delivered a scolding to Freeport Businessmen and women in an address delivered, during an inspection tour and opening ceremony for the new Bahamas Oil Refinery company, on July 29th 1969. The speech gained much acclaim and notoriety for its many different interpretations and it came to be known as "Pindling's Bend or Break" speech. In his discourse, Sir Lynden tongue-lashed those foreign investors, who were here at the time, for their bad attitudes toward Bahamians.

Sir Lynden told the investors, "Far too many here adopt the attitude that they are guaranteed rights to make money and that is all that matters." He furthered "Freeport has indeed been a miracle of economic development: it has indeed been a shining example of financial wizardry. What it lacks is humanity; what it needs is a social conscience: what it must have before too long is a soul," unquote.

By this time Sir Lynden had grown tired of their nonsense and was not prepared to allow the continuation of rank discrimination on the basis of race, housing, jobs, and income, which blatantly existed here in Freeport. He told them, "I have always been concerned about this lack of soul in Freeport; the absence of honest concern for the human and social needs of people. I was so concerned in the days when I stood almost alone. I had hoped that an early change would have been evident by now, but I have been severely disappointed. It is abundantly clear that, to developers in this area, Bahamian people do not matter. It is a fundamental part of my basic political philosophy that people are more important than things; that men are more important than machines. In this city where, regrettably, almost anything goes, where promisingly some economic opportunities have come to Bahamians, Bahamians are, nevertheless, still the victims of an unbending social order which, if it now refuses to bend, must now be broken," unquote.

At the container port, the safety and security of Bahamians don't seem to matter to the Chinese and in this regard, certainly, nothing has changed since Sir Lynden's 1969 warning. We seem to be fighting the same battles over and over again. These Chinese investors treat their own citizens at home like dogs and they come here with the same attitudes and, sadly, we let them get away with it.

You saw how quickly Hubert Ingraham and Vernae Grant came to the

container port's defence, didn't you? Why do you think they would be in such a hurry to defend this Chinese government operation? They both seem anxious to get in front of the camera and the microphones in order to tell the world that Hutchison Whampoa did nothing wrong and that they were innocent even before they were accused of any wrongdoing. But if they are not guilty, then who the hell is, I ask you?

For sure there are three dead Bahamians and a number of others who don't know whether they are coming or going, right now, and they expect us to accept that nobody is to be blamed?

Who ordered those men and women back to work in that bad weather, without any insurance coverage? Wasn't it Hutchison Whampoa? Without a full investigation by a commission of inquiry, as called for by the PLP, those to be blamed for the deaths and injuries will remain up in the air, unresolved.

Ingraham and Vernae Grant MP could not know anything after only a half hour visit, a cup of coffee and a fifteen-minute ride around the grounds, looking at some fallen down cranes. Neither of them knew what the hell they were looking at, so how could they intelligently exonerate Hutchison of any wrongdoing? I don't know about you, but I smell more than a couple rats here.

Forrester J Carroll J.P
Freeport, Grand Bahama
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