



Ministerial Statement

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Minister of Home Affairs

Caribbean-US High Level Citizen Security Dialogue

Wednesday June 17th, 2015

Madam President, on Thursday June 5th 2015, I had the distinct pleasure of traveling to Nassau Bahamas to attend the Caribbean-United States High Level Citizen Security Dialogue as an observer which was presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration of the Commonwealth of Bahamas. Accompanying me at these meetings at the Atlantic Paradise Island Resort Hotel was my Permanent Secretary, Mr. Randy Rochester.

The aim of the meetings was to address issues of security in the region for Caribbean citizens by way of discussions with the United States, since it is recognized that a large portion of illegal firearms enter the Caribbean through the United States. This meeting marked the 5th anniversary of the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (“the CBSI”). The CBSI is one pillar of a U.S. security strategy focused on citizen safety throughout the Caribbean.

CBSI brings all members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) together to jointly collaborate on regional security with the United States as its partner. The US and Caribbean countries have identified three core objectives to deal with the threats facing the Caribbean such as ***Substantially Reduce Illicit Trafficking***,

Increased Public Safety and Security (through programs ranging from reducing crime and violence to improving border security) to *Promoting Social Justice* (through programs designed to promote justice sector reform, combat government corruption, and assist vulnerable populations at risk of recruitment into criminal organizations).

Madam President, it is important to note that these programs are not only about drug interdiction but are designed to take a holistic approach to citizen safety in the Region. This meeting was designed to determine the effectiveness of the past five (5) years, the current threats in the Caribbean, to what the US and Caribbean needed to do over the next five (5) years to address these issues. Minister's for Immigration, Home Affairs and National Security from Antigua and Barbuda, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, St. Kitts and Nevis, to Grenada, along with delegates from the US, Curacao, Turks and Caicos and Canada attended the meetings.

Madam President, I shall now provide just a few highlights of the topics discussed during these meetings as well as the key areas of consideration for the countries represented.

Opening Discussion: *Five Years Later – the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative and the State of Citizen Security in the Caribbean, Threats, Opportunities and Areas for Deeper Engagement*. The focus here was to identify ways in which the United States and the Caribbean could build upon the first five years of the CBSI program, to increasing the effectiveness of the joint efforts. Threats to citizen security in the Caribbean included transnational criminal organizations that are involved in drug related crimes, systemic violence, corruption, weak judicial systems, to increased youth involvement in criminal activities.

As a result, CBSI is working across the Caribbean to support the efforts of the islands to combat the drug trade and other transnational crimes that threaten security with the ultimate objective of substantially reducing illicit trafficking, increasing public safety, strengthening the rule of law, to addressing the underlying, social and economic root causes of crime in the Caribbean.

The increased levels of crime and violence across the Caribbean to date were causing a strain on the human and financial resources that has resulted in a backlog of criminal cases awaiting trials.

Madam President, we often hear that Bermuda is another world. Well, similar to Bermuda, our sister islands to the south are also experiencing challenges of unemployment, especially among the youth. However, their numbers are considerably higher – averaging 25 to 40 percent across the Caribbean. Some of the key questions for consideration to the delegates to address the aforementioned threats ranged from citizen security, how the Caribbean islands could more effectively work with each other to align their limited resources against the most pressing needs, how the Caribbean can define regional threats such as narcotic trafficking, the flow of firearms, to the movement of criminals and contraband.

The second topic of discussion **Madam President** focused on: ***Addressing the Caribbean's At-Risk Youth*** – Identifying priority actions for the Caribbean partners to more effectively prevent youth from participating in criminal activities in their countries. **Madam President**, despite the upward trends in development in the Caribbean, which is evidenced by positive social indicators such as high life expectancy, low infant mortality, to universal education for the youth....the deterioration of security in the Caribbean threatens to derail any gains made which the islands in the Caribbean believe may lead to an erosion of confidence in future development of countries – which could reduce competitiveness of existing industries and services.

Madam President, an alarming statistic provided during the meetings was that of the increase in violence and crime with the overall homicide rate in the region increasing by an average of 165 percent from 2000-2010. Many factors have driven this increase which include but not limited to, a lack of educational, economic and social opportunities, to institutional weakness...particularly in the justice and security sectors.

The consensus among the countries represented was that the low rate of educational attainment, availability of jobs, to social exclusion were making it more likely that youth would become either victims of violence or perpetrators of

the same. As relating to the justice system police departments were under resourced and challenged with adopting ambitious reform programs to help them approach crime and violence from a preventative, human rights based perspective. The Justice and Penal systems are likewise challenged by a lack of resources and a long overdue need for reform.

Madam President, key questions raised during this discussion ranged from:

1. Are the current crime and violence prevention programs matching the needs of the Caribbean citizens – particularly the youth?
2. Have the necessary policy and legislative reforms been adopted to facilitate the collection, analysis and dissemination of accurate data on crime and violence; to,
3. Determining if action plans are in place to change the legislative frameworks to ensure the youth in conflict with the law have opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration into society to mitigate continued recidivism in the correctional institutions.

Madam President, the third topic of discussion centered on the ***Reduction of Firearms Trafficking in the Caribbean***. With the Caribbean facing a chronic and persistent level of crime and armed violence – with the average homicide rate of 39 per 100,000 inhabitants, this was a grave area of concern. Statistics show that 70% of these homicides are committed with firearms. One of the major contributing factors is the illegal trafficking of drugs, which has further facilitated the availability of firearms. And as mentioned previously, criminal cases involving illicit arms trafficking and armed violence face debilitating delays and backlogs in the judicial system that practically hinders any realization of justice and the rule of law.

Barbados, Bahamas and Jamaica were among the countries present that echoed these concerns throughout the meetings. Against that data, Caribbean countries were challenged to consider if their current firearms investigation, interdiction efforts and programs were addressing the needs of their citizens, determining how joint firearms programs could be more responsive, what action plans had been developed to better facilitate cooperation among the countries in the Caribbean and

other international partners, comprehensively addressing firearms trafficking, to determining whether the policies and legislative reforms have been adopted to facilitate the sharing of information on a region-wide basis for the purpose of investigating, prosecuting and interdicting illicit trafficking of firearms in the Caribbean.

The frustration was clearly evident five years after the implementation of the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, as it appeared some countries were still operating in silos and simply not sharing any information.

Madam President, the final topic of discussion was *Countering Narcotics Trafficking in the Caribbean*. As counter-narcotics efforts to apply pressure on the drug cartels in the Latin American countries continued, the traditional Caribbean smuggling routes that were once dormant, are now seeing traffic again.

A US delegate noted that in 2011, 4% of the drugs entering the United States came from the Caribbean – with that number increasing substantially to 17% in 2014 – and expected to increase further. Key questions for consideration ranged from determining how counter narcotics detection, interdiction and prosecution efforts could be more responsive to the needs of citizens, how effective was the use of civil asset forfeiture laws in the region to target illicit wealth of drug trafficking organizations, determining what impediments were there to effectively utilizing this type of legislation and tools to vigorously seize illicit proceeds of criminal organizations, to reviewing the accountability measures that have been put in place to ensure that civil servants, including law enforcement, judicial, and senior elected officials, adhere to high standards of public integrity – and finally, how are governments in the Caribbean working to divert non-violent drug users from prison thereby freeing up space for violent criminal offenders in the correctional facilities.

Madam President, although the Bahamian Prime Minister only attended the opening session, his passionate remarks and call for greater collaboration, communication and cooperation within the Bahamas and across the Caribbean hit the nail right on the head.

The Prime Minister called for improved efforts to get the unemployed back to work, a need to address the lack of training across the Caribbean, the support to work with an overburdened Justice system with the ever increasing backlog of cases, the call to reduce recidivism in the correctional facilities that are overwhelmed with prisoners, to the renewed focus on the youth to rid them of hopeless despair. The Prime Minister strongly encouraged his countrymen and all those at the meeting not to ignore the youth – as he quoted, “*For if we do, it will be at our own peril*”. The Prime Minister also expressed his shear disappointment at spending \$250mil to augment defense in his country, when this money could have been spent on other programmes to get the youth educated to building the economy to get the country out of this recession as examples.

Madam President, throughout the daylong meeting, it was clear that the issues across the Caribbean are somewhat similar to that of Bermuda – but on a much larger scale. Although there was extreme frustration expressed by most of the Minister’s representing their respective countries in the Caribbean, I don’t for one minute believe these issues are insurmountable.

I strongly believe better collaboration and sharing of information and resources across the Caribbean could go a long way to reducing the drug and weapons problems in the region. The challenge is with the amount of ports of entry and the close proximity of each island that makes maritime interdiction and enforcement that much harder. Coupled with that is the less than favorable economies across the Caribbean which lends itself to the criminal element. Notwithstanding these challenges, I am confident that they will see the rewards of their labour.

Madam President, as I wrap up, I would like to provide some of the recommendations submitted for the Caribbean to consider as well as commitments made by the US and Caribbean countries during the closing session.

1. The US, acknowledged that gun trafficking in the Caribbean is a serious issue and confirmed that they have re-imposed some restrictions on small weapons as was in the past. Guns in checked baggage inspections have also become more stringent with US Agencies committing to working closer with the Caribbean in this regard.

2. The US encouraged all islands in the region to adopt the E-Trace system, which would allow better tracking of weapons used in criminal activity across the Caribbean and around the world to determine if the same weapons were being used in multiple crimes – among other benefits. In essence, it can be a ballistic signature to match crime scenes.
3. Putting sports back in the schools – which would give the youth an outlet to burn off excess energy by doing something positive.
4. Improved dialogue and connection with private sector to create opportunities for the youth. This would mean working closer with private sector industry to create job opportunities as part of their corporate social responsibility.
5. Tackle transparency with law enforcement as well as improve the marine and air interdiction since most drugs are entering the Caribbean by sea.
6. Better information sharing in the region as the islands can no longer afford to operate in silos.
7. Getting churches, parents and community groups involved, as the police cannot do this alone.
8. Using positive role models across the region for kids to look up to, as this could encourage them to take different paths other than to the gang life. The famous actor Sidney Poitier from the Bahamas was one such example.
9. Training youth as musicians since tourism is a major part of the Caribbean culture and economy.
10. Training the youth in the area of soft skills as well as assisting them to develop their resumes to better position them for career opportunities.
11. Improve conflict resolution and communication skills among the youth to help them avoid confrontation/violence.

12. Implement a witness protection program among the Caribbean similar to Bermuda and Trinidad and Tobago model.

13. Update the firearms legislation across the region and adopt strategies to combat firearm trafficking; and finally,

14. Look at countries in the region to determine who has the resources to contribute in particular areas to support any agreed recommendations.

Thank you **Madam President**.