



NATIONAL ADDRESS

PLAN FOR IRREGULAR MIGRANTS
AND IRREGULAR HOUSING

.....

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SUNDAY 19TH FEBRUARY, 2023



Good evening everyone,

Thank you very much for joining us for this update on our nation's policies regarding irregular migrants and shantytowns. There have been multiple developments in recent days, and I wanted to be clear about our government's policy framework concerning these very important issues.

First, though, I want to thank the many Bahamians who made hosting CARICOM this past week a success. I was proud to share our beautiful country, people, and culture with leaders from across the region, and we thank you all for the role you played in showcasing The Bahamas in grand form. For those of you who may have been inconvenienced during the course of the CARICOM activities, I wish to thank you for your patience.

In today's interconnected world, many of the most serious and complex challenges we face here at home have their origin abroad. Guns manufactured in America are used to commit crimes here. Viruses pay no mind to international borders. Monetary policy and supply chain problems elsewhere lead to a global inflation crisis that affects Bahamian consumers. The most severe consequences of climate change often occur in countries who have polluted the least. A war on the other side of the globe leads to higher energy prices everywhere.

Crisis and instability in other countries do not stay contained in those countries. Because so many of our most serious problems originate abroad, we must work together with other nations to solve them.

That's why international meetings like the one we just hosted are so important. Progress may not always happen as quickly as we'd like, but debating ideas and negotiating cooperation is the only way forward.

Last week, the Caribbean Heads of Government worked together on initiatives to improve climate finance and to strengthen food security in the region.

We also spent a significant portion of the conference focused on the migration crisis that is affecting many countries but disproportionately impacting the islands closest to Haiti and Cuba.

As many of you know, the situation in Haiti unfortunately continues to deteriorate.

The pillars of the CARICOM plan to address the Haitian migration crisis include:

- Coordinating a meeting with Haitian stakeholders to develop a plan to restore security and the rule of law;
- Strengthening the capacity of the Haitian National Police;
- Developing a plan to hold elections and restore a fully functioning Haitian government;
- And securing support from international partners including the Canadian government, which has committed to providing security assistance, as well as millions of dollars in humanitarian assistance.

In the coming weeks, the details of these pillars will continue to be developed with regional leaders.

This is important because stabilising the situation in Haiti is the most effective way to decrease the amount of potential economic migrants coming to the The Bahamas each day.

I have been very clear with our international friends that assistance to Haiti must be carried out carefully and strategically, and with an acknowledgement of the burden The Bahamas is already carrying, and has been carrying for decades.

Our country has been through a lot. We have very serious challenges and limited resources with which to face these challenges. We are a compassionate people, but we cannot take on new burdens.

That is why, last June, at the Summit of Americas held in Los Angeles, I declined to sign a pledge that included a commitment to take on refugees. While 21 other countries in our hemisphere, including fellow Caribbean nations like Barbados and Jamaica, signed on to this agreement, I declined. Our small nation cannot possibly shoulder any more of a burden.

We are standing strong on this position. Despite pressure, earlier this year, when the United Nations called for countries in our region to halt deportations to Haiti, once again, I decided to continue repatriations.

This is a decision I made for the benefit of all Bahamians and future generations of Bahamians. The Bahamas is for Bahamians, and for those who are prepared to follow the laws of our country. We simply cannot afford open borders.

This is why we continue to advocate for a Haitian-led solution to the ongoing crisis in Haiti – a sustainable solution supported by a partnership between many nations. The Bahamas will gladly endorse such an effort, but that solution cannot, and will not, ever include actions that may further negatively impact the Bahamian economy and our communities.

Friends, I fully understand the frustrations felt throughout our islands.

Clearly, successive administrations could have done more to protect our borders, enforce our laws, eliminate shantytowns, or build an international coalition to address the root problem.

The Bahamian people have understandably grown impatient.

The need to tackle our immigration problems is urgent.

Because the life we enjoy here is precious.

And anything this valuable must be protected.

Tonight, I want the Bahamian people to know that my administration has been hard at work. We have a comprehensive plan to disrupt the flow of migrants to our islands and to actively pursue the identification and repatriation of those who have entered our nation illegally.

The Bahamas is a nation of laws, and we will continue to enforce those laws, responsibly and humanely.

And what we are doing is making an impact.

Last year, 4,748 persons were repatriated. Let me be clear: 4,748 is the largest number of repatriations in a calendar year in our country's history.

In 2023, already, 1,024 persons have been repatriated.

Since we came into office in September 2021, only one migrant vessel was able to land on an inhabited island.

Alongside our very vigorous and ongoing repatriation efforts, we have worked to bring the international community together in support of a sustainable solution in Haiti.

In addition, for more than a year, we have been systematically working to satisfy legal requirements, put in place by our nation's Supreme Court, so that we can take more aggressive action on shantytowns.

Over this period, we have conducted surveillance and gathered evidence establishing that these communities are unlawful and expanding.

For years, the Court's injunction has stood in the way of concerted action on unregulated and illegal communities. But on Friday, the 10th of February, our application to have the injunction discharged was successful, paving the way for the government to act.

Following the removal of the injunction, we immediately launched Operation Secure.

Operation Secure is a collaborative security operation between the Royal Bahamas Police Force, The Defence Force, and the Department of Immigration, to address security and migration-related issues in unregulated and unlawful communities. The

operation is focused on identifying irregular migrants, documented migrants, and Bahamians living in these communities, and addressing their status in a comprehensive and coordinated manner.

We cannot have shantytowns on our islands: they are unsafe, a hazard to public health, they are against the law, and they directly impact our way of life.

Our priority is decisive action, based on the laws of our land.

Undocumented migrants will continue to be processed and repatriated. This is already underway and will be greatly expanded in the coming days and weeks.

Documented migrants living in unregulated communities will be required to relocate at their expense or their employer's expense, or face repatriation.

And any Bahamian citizens found to be living in these communities will be required to relocate.

In addition, we must also hold accountable the entire network of people who make possible these shantytowns.

Through Operation Secure, we will prevent the exploitation and abuse of migrants by unscrupulous landowners and businesses, holding accountable those with a reckless disregard for our laws. Operation Secure targets those entering our borders illegally, as well as any Bahamian citizen or legal resident who is breaking our laws.

If you are a Crown Land holder who is unlawfully leasing land, you will be prosecuted.

If you are engaged in human smuggling, you will be prosecuted.

And if you are employing migrants illegally, you will be prosecuted.

We will have a zero-tolerance policy for anyone seeking to break or circumvent the laws of The Bahamas.

We depend on the skill and professionalism of our uniformed officers.

At this point I wish to thank the Commodore of the Defence Force, the Commissioner of Police, the Director of Immigration and all their officers, for their service.

To support the successful execution of Operation Secure, we will continue to recruit more Immigration Officers and consideration is being given for the construction of a new Detention Centre on the island of Inagua, so that migrants who are detained anywhere in The Bahamas can be repatriated without the need to travel to New Providence.

As Operation Secure addresses the situation on the ground, we are investing heavily in protecting our borders.

The Royal Bahamas Defence Force is completing the final phase of the Sandy Bottom Project. This multi-administration initiative is the largest capital investment project ever initiated by the government of The Bahamas to expand the Defence Force's fleet. The additional ships have enhanced the Defence Force's capabilities to carry out its mandate to secure our territorial waters.

To support the growth of our fleet, we continue to expand the recruitment of additional Defence Force Officers. Under the previous administration, recruitment had

been halted. We have made it a priority to grow the Force to the strength needed to defend our borders.

As we place the issue of undocumented migrants at the top of our agenda, we have been adding the necessary manpower in agencies like the Department of Immigration and the Defence Force to support these activities. The addition of a second Detention Centre and the introduction of additional ships demands more officers. Likewise, our recruitment efforts are supported by the provision of new equipment, machinery, vessels, and supplies needed to empower our officers to effectively execute their duties.

As we increase our capacity for border protection, we will build on our partnerships with neighboring countries like the US, Cuba, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and Haiti for enhanced cooperation and intelligence sharing. We will also be increasing border protection operations with key partners like the US Coast Guard.

The reality is we have to defend one hundred thousand square miles of territory in The Bahamas. Even wealthy nations like the United States, with all resources at their disposal, struggle to put a complete stop to the inflow of undocumented migrants across their borders. But the difficulty of the task will not deter us from doing all that we can to intercept undocumented vessels in our waters.

Where cooperation is possible, we will welcome all the help we can get – whether through our work with regional and international partners or through major NGOs whom we will invite to support Operation Secure by providing humanitarian help.

We pledge to conduct our efforts swiftly and humanely, and above all to maintain accountability to the Bahamian people on this commitment.

This is my land, this is your land, this is our land.

I encourage each of you to be proactive about becoming informed. Know the facts.

We are posting the plan on the OPM website.

Understand the law, understand the facts, and understand the role you can and should play in supporting our plan.

This government recognises the urgent need for action on Immigration.

We are overseeing concentrated, strategic efforts to take this issue on and mitigate the economic, social, and environmental damage done to Bahamian communities.

We will continue to adapt to the situation on the ground and in our waters. We have a collective responsibility to do our part to protect what is ours.

May God continue to bless you and bless our land, The Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

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