

Governor's statement on addressing crime in Turks and Caicos

Let me start, as the Governor, by welcoming you. For those listening to us on the radio we are in the Premier's Office and I'm joined by the Premier and the recently appointed Commissioner of Police. We also have with us the Deputy Governor, Deputy Premier, and the Executive Leadership team of the Police Force.

We are here to describe and take questions about the recent spike in the murder rate on the islands.

Let me first start with the most important group we want to acknowledge; the victims. Their lives taken, their futures stolen. Their families, their friends hurt beyond imagination. Those who were their parents, their partners, their sweethearts, their brothers, their sisters, their children. Those who were once at their school or who shared a work place or who just thoroughly enjoyed their company or their humour. Those that loved them intensely in life and those who had no idea how much they thought of them until they were gone.

I'm very aware that a life taken away – suddenly, unexpectedly and violently – is a blow very hard to deal with. There's an immediate overwhelming heart-stopping shock to be replaced over time by a feeling of sadness that remains and returns when least expected. No opportunity for a final goodbye, no opportunity to perhaps put something right or say something that needed to be said.

The cold statistic of 10 murders doesn't start to explain the impact this has on those very close to the person who has lost their life, but also on a community. And on an island, which is one extended community, a violent attack on one member feels like an attack on us all. I speak therefore for all of us when I say we want to bring those who did this, to your loved ones, and to our community, to justice.

Beyond gaining justice for those we have lost, you quite rightly want to know what we are going to do about this to prevent further loss, and that's the purpose of this press conference.

I promised when I was sworn in that I was going to be clear, and in being 'clear' I was going to be 'straight'. So what we are not going to do is down-play the seriousness nor are we going to offer you the illusion of a quick fix.

Anyone suggesting there is one, hasn't looked at a whole range of comparative scenarios from around the region or from around the world as to how serious crime has to be tackled across government and society.

I said when appointing the new local Deputy Commissioner, last month, that

when we come to talking about 'the police and crime' we have reached the end of a conversation rather than having a much needed conversation about its causes. It's going to take time, and it's going to take far more than just 'the police' to develop a society that's at ease with itself and where serious crime is a genuine aberration.

The important march on Sunday, led by our church leaders, supported by the Honourable Premier and Honourable Leader of the Opposition, which placed an emphasis on society and community, was an excellent example that these leaders, religious and secular, understand that.

In being clear and in being straight we are also not going to engage in hyperbole or stoke emotions. What our collective intention is, in a leadership role, is to inform you with facts. What's the issue? What's being done?

I'm first going to say something about the leadership, not only of this issue, but our general approach to leading the country at times such as this, and then something about what the facts are telling us. The Commissioner is then going to talk about the immediate policing response that he and his Executive Team have led. Most importantly the Premier is going to talk to the wider societal issues and her government's continued support to the police as we move forward. We will then take questions.

Let's start at the top. The most important thing we, as a national leadership team can do, at this time, is lead. The symbolism of the three of us presenting together should not be lost on you, nor on the criminals. We have been working on this, in the background, as part of the National Security Strategy since I arrived and we had expected to explain this change of approach, when we rolled that out. But today we have the opportunity to give you a glimpse of how we are going to lead national and internal security going forward.

The world is now too complex for there to be institutional stovepipes and we intend to lead in a joined up way in the expectation that others will match our behaviours and work across institutional boundaries to deliver results.

Beyond that simple thought: those on the front line delivering operational impact; those paying for it; those who are held responsible to the electorate; those who can propose policy and deliver legislation, and; those who hold the Constitutional lead, including in extremis the power to call on emergency powers, or on international support, have to be working in sympathy.

Being blunt, if we can't get it together at the top, what hope below. Some have called this a crisis (given what I've seen in my life this isn't, I assure you, a crisis). But if it is, it's also an opportunity to make this three way relationship meaningful. The three of us have seized that opportunity. It's now the new normal. Key point: every resource and power available to us can, as we wish, now be focused rapidly when and where we want it to be because we are joined up.

So what's the problem we are seeking to solve? I've already described 10 murders. That's 10 too many; justice needs to be done and will be done. Beyond that, what else are the facts telling us.

The first is, is that the emotions the public are feeling, are grounded in truth. I'm going to give you the facts as to why we should as a society be concerned and focused. What we should not be, as a society is panicked or afraid. In this regard what is not helpful are misleading accounts on social media of phantom shootings and non-existent attacks that distract police from dealing with issues where there is genuinely life at risk.

If you are spreading a story on social media about an attack that's supposedly occurring but that you've not witnessed, please pause and think. Are you helping make society better and safer. Gossip and rumour are toxic at the best of times but when they promote unnecessary fear, when what we need is strength and resilience, they become part of the problem. Please be part of the solution. Please deal in known facts.

I want to first of all explain one fact that I know you are less interested in but one that is none-the-less accurate and important. Year-on-year the overall (and I stress the word here overall) crime statistics have been falling. Over five years overall crime is down 30%. I've been with our police more since my arrival than I have been with my own team. We have an increasingly good force. The statistics tell us that away from the most serious crime where there are really deep non-policing factors at play, our police have been getting better at doing their job and part of this is down to investments made in them.

But I also know that, at this moment, this is not the figure that you are interested in. What you are interested in are the levels of serious crime. On this issue the figures tell us an interesting story. Over the last five years they initially rose to peak in 2016/17 at 426 serious crimes that year to then fall back, in line with other falls in crime rate, to 314 last year.

So what's happened this year. If we look at the April to August figures and compare them to last year, there is a sharp increase in serious crime. If you break this down further it's not 'murder' (the very visible and appalling tip of the ice-berg) that shows a significant increase but instead that which is less easy for the press or public to see: 'firearms offences'.

Murder, itself, shows a relatively small rise but the more general firearms offences have increased from 26 last year to 62 this year. That's very significant.

Some of these firearms offences are linked to robbery, it's those that we know are causing widespread public concern, but a significant number are indeed 'retaliation', not so much linked to gangs or turf, but to perceived arguments and disrespect amongst groups. It's an uncomfortable truth, but it's a truth the three of us need to share with you, that much of this problem is not imported, it's home grown. It's not 'the other', it's 'us'.

It's also worth saying that we believe we are dealing with a very small

number of criminals – who are increasingly becoming known to us – and when arrested and charged – because there is evidence that can be put before the court – will reduce, possibly seriously reduce, the problem we have right now.

Having explained the local picture I now want to say something about how this impacts on our tourist industry as it's not just local but international commentators that are following this. The way murder rates are calculated globally is by death per 100,000. In a country as small as ours just one murder starts to impact on this ratio. Just one bad individual can start to change the way our Islands are presented globally.

The facts are that in 5 years we have lost only two tourists to murder. One at a resort, one in a private residence. That is two too many. Everything I said at the start of this conference about the devastating shock to family and friends I want to reemphasize, again. The shock is exacerbated because these were our guests in our country, away from their family and their friends and they came because they knew they were coming to a world class, amazingly relaxed and tranquil destination, that have people returning year-on-year, who in many cases see it as their second spiritual home, because they love these islands and her people. It is, and it remains, one of the most perfect destinations in the world.

The facts regarding tourist safety are we have 1.8 million tourists arriving with us by air or sea every year. A tourist is statistically extraordinarily safe; almost certainly safer than in their home country. It's important, as we face down the problem we have, we don't unintentionally signal that this island is anything other than amazingly safe for our visitors and what a superb job our tourist industry do in ensuring their guests have an extraordinary time with them and with us.

Finally TCI: we are bigger, we are better and we are stronger than allowing a small number of bad men, to bring fear into our amazing country. The stoicism we show in times of natural disaster is admirable; let's show it now. As you hear the Commissioner and Premier speak let's all of us assume 'agency', not just in observing the problem, but being a part of the wider societal solution.

As I hand over to our Commissioner, I end where I began, we are determined to bring those who are working so hard to undermine our society to justice. Our thoughts – indeed our motivation – come from us understanding the deep hurt that these men did to the victims and those close to their victims – and if this ever was to your mind a crisis, it's now become a realised opportunity. You have an unshakable national team that intends to impose itself on this and any future national security problem. This is therefore an important moment for the country in more than one sense. Commissioner, over to you.