

Press Releases: Press Availability With Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness

Remarks

Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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MODERATOR: (In progress) as well as the U.S. Secretary of State, the Honorable Rex Tillerson. You may be seated. Thank you so much for joining us, everyone, on this working visit of the U.S. Secretary of State to Jamaica. The Prime Minister will make some remarks, followed by Secretary Tillerson.

Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER HOLNESS: Members of the media, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. It was my great pleasure to welcome Secretary of State Tillerson to Jamaica and to host him and his delegation on this brief but historic working visit to Jamaica. Secretary Tillerson and I have engaged in critical discussions on issues of mutual interest to Jamaica and the United States, as well as the region, with a focus on promoting a peaceful, prosperous, energy-secure, and democratic hemisphere.

Among the specific matters discussed were strengthening security cooperation in order to more effectively combat transnational organized crime; boosting the U.S.-Jamaica economic partnership; exploring opportunities to broaden U.S.-CARICOM engagement; energy security; the economic vulnerability of middle-income countries, including climatic events; de-risking and correspondent banking issues; and of course, the situation in Venezuela.

Our talks reflected Jamaica's long and productive relationship with the United States and signaled the importance of the strong and vibrant partnership that exists between our two countries. I highlighted the common values we share based on our geographic proximity, our strong historical and cultural ties, our robust trade, tourism and investment relations, our large Jamaican diaspora in the USA, and our strong record of people-to-people contacts at all levels.

I expressed gratitude on behalf of the government and people of Jamaica for

the high levels of support provided by the United States to Jamaica over the years, especially in the areas which have assisted in meeting our national development goals. In particular, we have greatly valued America's efforts to disrupt transnational crime through continued support to effectively secure Jamaica's maritime space. We agreed to deepen our cooperation in this regard, acknowledging also that the sharing and exchange of intelligence is critical to safely – is critical to the safety and security of our two countries and the wider region.

With respect to our economic partnership, Secretary Tillerson and I both agreed that the transformation of Jamaica's energy sector is critical to the achievement of our development objectives, including resilience. I expressed the hope that the U.S. will continue to support our thrust towards energy independence in the region, including greater efficiency in energy use and greater in cooperation of renewable energy sources. I expressed the hope that the United States will strengthen its economic partnerships and participation in the region in the interests of our respective countries and peoples.

Additionally, we used the opportunity to discuss diaspora matters and the invaluable contribution of Jamaicans resident in the United States, including those engaged in service sectors of critical importance to the United States economy.

Secretary Tillerson reiterated the concern of the U.S. Government on the political and economic crisis in Venezuela and the impact on the most vulnerable. We both agreed that positive engagement between the government and the opposition in Venezuela is essential, and expressed regret that the attempts of the OAS to promote dialogue have not been met with success. At the conclusion of our meeting, we agreed that the Government of Venezuela must act in the best interest of its people and that it should ensure that the presidential elections are free, fair, and credible in the eyes of the Venezuelan people and the international community.

Secretary Tillerson, I thank you for visiting Jamaica today, as we work towards a shared vision of peaceful, prosperous, energy-secure, and a democratic hemisphere. I thank you for the frank and candid dialogue and the spirit of cooperation which have made our talks constructive and fruitful. I look forward to continuing the vibrant partnership enjoyed between Jamaica and the United States in the years ahead. I thank you. (Applause.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, first, let me begin by thanking the prime minister for a very warm welcome to Jamaica and for the hospitality shown to myself and my delegation. This is indeed my first visit to Jamaica, although I shared with him some of my family members have been here. I think they have more vacation days than I do. (Laughter.)

But indeed, it really is a pleasure to be here and, as the prime minister indicated, have a very, very far-reaching, comprehensive discussion and exchange on important issues to both of our countries, but also to take note of the strong record of cooperation that exists between the United States and Jamaica. And as most of you know, this is the concluding stop on a trip that I've taken throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and this stop I think

is important because Jamaica is our closest partner in this region.

The United States understands the importance of – that our security and prosperity are very closely tied to that of our Caribbean neighbors, and we're glad to have the partner we have in Jamaica. And I noted that the prime minister is assuming the chairmanship of CARICOM, and so I think it made our discussions even that much more timely and useful. Because we did speak about the region more broadly, as well, beyond just Jamaica and the U.S. relations.

We did talk about several aspects of the U.S.-Jamaica bilateral relationship, and our view is of the outsized role that Jamaica does play in the region as a leader to other countries here in the Caribbean Basin. Through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, the United States and the Caribbean have really taken great strides in unifying our approach to regional security, but we discussed ways in which we could take that further and do more.

We appreciate the Jamaican Government's commitment to countering narcotics trafficking and transnational criminal organizations and the cooperation that we already enjoy, but we also see many, many opportunities to enhance that cooperation to be even more effective in disrupting these illegal organizations.

We appreciate the Government of Jamaica has made important progress combatting the lotto scams, cooperating closely with U.S. authorities to extradite suspected lotto scammers to the United States and establishing a bilateral lotto scam task force, and we welcome that. The U.S. Government will continue to support Jamaica's security forces and criminal justice system. It is in both of our countries' interests to work together to investigate crimes, share intelligence, conduct asset seizures where legally and appropriate to do so, and bolster existing anti-corruption and anti-gang programs.

In addition to our focus on regional security, as the prime minister indicated, we had a very comprehensive discussion on ways to promote increased energy independence not just for Jamaica, but throughout the Caribbean. And we stand ready to assist with Jamaica and other partners in the Caribbean to explore and develop the resources they have, but also to share the abundance of resources that North America enjoys and the continent enjoys. Jamaica is developing new wind, solar, and gas – natural gas capabilities, all of which are going to serve the Jamaican people better.

And finally, as mentioned to the prime minister and Minister Johnson Smith, the United States appreciates Jamaica adding its voice to the major issues affecting our region, and the prime minister just spoke very eloquently about the concern we all share regarding the situation in Venezuela. Jamaica's votes in the OAS to achieve stability, prosperity, and support democracy in Venezuela have demonstrated exceptional support to the human rights issues that confront us in the Western Hemisphere. We will continue to ask our partners to support the people of Venezuela during this very trying time for them, and we will continue – the United States will – to put pressure on the Maduro regime to return its country to free, open, and democratic elections. The people of Venezuela deserve this.

So today, we'll continue to work hand in hand to advance regional security cooperation, build economic partnerships. We have so much more to do together, and thank you again, Prime Minister, for the very warm welcome. (Applause.)

MODERATOR: Thank you so much, Secretary Tillerson, and Prime Minister. Now, ladies and gentlemen, we'll open the floor for some questions. Prime Minister, Secretary Tillerson, we have members of the overseas traveling media as well as our local media entities here with us.

I have – again, the rules, you raise your hand, I'll identify you, and then when you – the microphone is brought to you, could you please identify yourself, your media entity, and ask succinctly your question to the leaders? I see a hand over there, if we could get the microphone that side, please. Ms. Chisholm, in the back.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, good afternoon. Andrea Chisholm from Television Jamaica. Secretary Tillerson, at the United Nations prior to the vote on Jerusalem, the U.S. ambassador to the UN said that we are watching, and many saw that as a threat to small and developing countries. Then there are some who classify Haiti, one of our CARICOM partners, as “blank-hole” countries. How should we perceive your visit today and how can Caribbean countries think that you respect us and it's not more of the United States just throwing their power around?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I'm here to reinforce the partnership and how we view the partnerships with Jamaica, but also with the entire Caribbean region, as I just indicated in my remarks. This is an important region to us. As we discussed today, this is the United States' third border, and Jamaica has the largest stretch of that third border with the United States – very important to our national security but also important to future economic opportunity as well. So the U.S. sees many, many opportunities for furthering our cooperation on trade, for strengthening our security cooperation, and most particularly, for combating these transnational criminal organizations that bring nothing but problems and violence and devastation to Jamaica and the region, but also certainly to the homeland for the United States.

So we seek to strengthen this – our partnerships in the region, and we see many, many opportunities to do so, and that's why we're really excited about the prime minister assuming chairmanship of CARICOM and it's why – one of the reasons why I really wanted to meet with him today.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Secretary Tillerson. I recognize CBS. I believe you had a hand up. Could you identify yourself formally, please?

QUESTION: Yeah, hi, Kylie Atwood with CBS News. Thank you very much. Mr. Prime Minister, I have a question for you first. The U.S. is continuing to look for ways to build up opposition and to economically isolate the Maduro regime in Venezuela. You've stated that you support the U.S. in those efforts today, but is Jamaica willing and able to stop importing Venezuelan oil?

And Secretary Tillerson, a question for you: How would the U.S. be able to

support the Caribbean and Jamaica specifically if you're asking them to cut down on the amount of oil that they're importing from Jamaica? Could the U.S. provide any subsidized oil to Jamaica and these other countries? What are you thinking about as possibilities? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER HOLNESS: Jamaica supports human rights, Jamaica supports peace in this region, and Jamaica wants to see the people of Venezuela being able to enjoy their democracy. This is a principle that has nothing to do with any other country. This has always been Jamaica's position. We wish the best for the people of Venezuela. We now don't hardly import oil from Venezuela. With the new dynamics in the global trade and energy and with the United States now becoming a net exporter of energy resources, Jamaica can, in this new paradigm, benefit from that.

MODERATOR: Secretary?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, as the prime minister, I think, made the point in his remarks, this is one of the things that binds Jamaica and the U.S. so closely, is strong commitment to democratic values. And it's why we're just both heartbroken to see what's happening in Venezuela, as we're seeing what was once a thriving democracy dismantled before our very eyes. It's the reason we intend to take all actions possible to persuade the regime to return to its full constitutional authorities, return it to the hands of the Venezuelan people.

As to any future steps that the U.S. might take regarding sanctioning oil or products to put more pressure on the Maduro regime, we are going to take into full consideration the impacts on regional countries as well. And we had a good exchange today regarding that issue not just for Jamaica, but also getting the prime minister's perspective on other countries, how they might be affected. And we will be looking at what are actions the U.S. might take to mitigate the negative impacts of that.

So I don't want to get into specifics because we're going to – we're going to undertake a very quick study to see: Are there some things that the U.S. could easily do with our rich energy endowment, with the infrastructure that we already have available – what could we do to perhaps soften any impact of that?

Having said that, I think there is – there's great unanimity in the region and certainly in the hemisphere that we all want to see some progress on this situation in Venezuela, which only gets worse day by day.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Secretary Tillerson and Prime Minister. I recognize at the back Mr. Campbell.

QUESTION: Thank you. Edmond Campbell, Gleaner Company. Good afternoon, Secretary of State and Prime Minister Holness. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in December of last year rejecting the American recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. But prior to that vote, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, she warned countries not – well, to vote with the U.S., or not to vote against the U.S., or the U.S. might be withdrawing aid

from such countries.

Secretary Tillerson, is that a policy position of the U.S.?

And Prime Minister Holness, could you just explain to us specifically why it is that Jamaica sat on the fence in that particular vote? Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think President Trump actually addressed this in his State of the Union speech the other night when he said we need to undertake a re-examination of how the United States provides aid around the world globally, and not just for this particular issue, but more broadly in terms of: As we provide significant assistance to countries, are these countries that align with our values? Are they countries that align with what we believe are ways to make the world a safer and more prosperous place?

And so I think it's in that context that I would answer your question, as it's not been examined in quite some time, if ever, in terms of: How does the United States want to think about the generosity of the American people, because this is the American people's money that's being provided to others, and what should the expectation be around – what are we supporting?

And so as the President stated in his State of the Union address, he's asked that we consider that question. There has been no new policy adopted at this point, but he's asked us to think about all of our elements of our aid programs, and are they really advancing and promoting the values that the American people want to see advanced.

PRIME MINISTER HOLNESS: Edmond, Jamaica was one of several countries in the Caribbean region that abstained. From our perspective, from a diplomatic perspective, Jamaica did not need to take a position on another country's position on where they would want to see as a capital in the world. So from our perspective, this was not an issue that Jamaica should take a position on.

And generally speaking, Jamaica conducts its foreign policy on principle. We are not conducting foreign policy for aid or for special benefits. So I want to make that position very clear to the Jamaican people.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Prime Minister, Secretary Tillerson. And given our time issue, let's take a final question. The gentleman with the beard.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Oh, another question. I thought we were done.
(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Hello, Mr. Secretary, the gentleman with the beard. (Laughter.) I am Dave Clark from Agence France-Presse. The question's actually for Mr. Prime Minister. Mr. Prime Minister, when we were with the Secretary in Mexico last week, Foreign Minister Videgaray said that if America went ahead and expelled more than a million so-called Dreamers, that this would be a win for Mexico, a massive injection of human capital, and a loss for the United States, because they'd be losing a lot of valuable workers. You yourself have just spoken about the large Jamaican diaspora in the United States. From your perspective, if the United States were to halt or reverse immigration from

Jamaica and the Caribbean, would that be a loss for the United States or would that be a loss for Jamaica? And how do you feel when the President of the United States is reported as saying he would prefer immigrants from Norway? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER HOLNESS: Well, you raise a very interesting question. We, in Jamaica, have struggled with the reverse of immigration, which is the loss of tremendous talent and human resource, much of which we pay for. We call it the brain drain. At the same time, the Government of Jamaica would not want to see people deprived of their dreams and aspirations and ambitions. But from a government perspective, we are a practical government. And as we look on as to what another independent country would do with their internal foreign policy, we stand ready to welcome all our Jamaicans, and we want our diaspora to continue to support and participate in Jamaica.

You mentioned an important thing, Secretary Tillerson. You say, America the homeland. Jamaica is the homeland for Jamaicans, and we would want to have their skills and their resources here. And we support them as well in their dreams to settle and work in other countries, and we encourage them to abide by the laws and institutions of that country.

MODERATOR: Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Mr. Prime Minister and Secretary Tillerson.

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