

Turks and Caicos Governor's update on national response to gang related violence

Good Day Turks and Caicos,

This is your Governor speaking from the National Emergency Operations Room in Providenciales.

Following my address to the House of Assembly, and as promised, I now provide an update on the support we have received, and we are to receive, as we face down gang related violence.

What I'm about to say captures work that myself and the Premier have been engaged on together, over the last week, in close collaboration with the Commissioner, who has driven the operation and worked tirelessly to deliver.

There is, I should say, a daily – including weekend – National Emergency Operations Group that myself, the Premier or his Office, the Police Commissioner, Chambers, National Security Secretariat and OT Policing Advisor attend.

The Premier and I met at 8:30 am this morning to review progress. Without predicting the immediate future, because matters can change, I can say the situation over recent days has been significantly more stable. Indeed matters have been unusually quiet.

We don't rest on our laurels and know that those that would do us harm are both taking stock of recent Policing reinforcements, while licking their wounds following more than one confrontation with our Tactical Unit. Our Officers remain proactive. Some gang members may be seeking to leave the Territory. If you are aware of this, CRIMESTOPPERS want to know: +1 800 8477. +1 800 8477.

It is true to say that this calm is down to courageous work by our Police and that has included sustained pressure – including a significant arrest, weapon and drug recoveries, and the unfortunate fatal shooting of a young man who – it seems – chose to fire on our Tactical Unit.

I have said before that if you are confronted by our Tactical Firearms Officers, or Response Teams, it really would be best to lie down and place your hands out in front of you. If you fire on our Officers – or others – their rules of engagement mean they will return fire to save life; theirs or others. They are far better trained than you are, and they will prevail.

Every death is unfortunate. So I repeat the advice; this isn't a movie or a video game – if you are confronted – drop to the floor – hands outstretched. You are young and you think yourself invincible – but you are not.

Beyond local Police bravery, and skill, I also have little doubt that the arrival of the Royal Bahamas Police Force, and the US's Customs and Border Protection Aircraft, along with Drugs Enforcement Agency, has had an immediate deterrent effect.

If it hasn't, it should have. If the gangs have gone to ground, they will be found. If gang members have moved overseas, we have international partners – including the UK's National Crime Agency and regional governments – who are solidly in support of helping us track them. If our short term measures are being effective, I promise our long term measures have to be determinative.

The US maritime surveillance support has been operational for some days and nights, protecting our borders and UK Border Force experts arrive on Sunday. As you have heard from the Commissioner, Royal Bahamas Police Officers have been sworn in as local Constables.

I will leave it to the Commissioner, in his regular updates, to talk to operational deployments but I hope you feel reassured by their rapid arrival. That the Bahamas, TCI and the UK expedited the legal work and planning – at break-neck pace – so four days after the announcement to the House of Assembly, they had arrived, happened because all three parties were seized of the need. The day after the Bahamian Officers arrived, they were operational.

All I need to say now, is they've already made a difference. Some are directly inducted into our 'Tactical Firearms Unit', making one large joint Team. Some are deployed as Response Units. Their dogs, able to attack or to search, were active at the airport yesterday, supporting our Customs Officers search for guns and drugs.

I, the Premier and Commissioner, and the people of the TCI, are extremely grateful for what can only be described as very generous support from our steadfast neighbour. Bahamas, you have been your brother's keeper.

Jamaica's kind offer is on the table and our Commissioner, and theirs, are involved in detailed discussions today. Miami Dade Police have made similar offers.

With that immediate support in place – which is appropriate and proportionate to our immediate needs – I want to now say something about the next phases of support, and also the longer term.

We have now shown that this situation can be 'policed', by Police Officers (our own supported by Bahamas) and so I do not want to put British Troops onto the 'so called' streets. I have done this myself, albeit many decades ago, and while it is immediately popular, that popularity quickly wains. Soldiers are not trained to Police. It is why I have purposefully held back the local Regiment. Police are trained across a wide-spectrum of skill, and that includes mounting intelligence led arrest operations against gangsters. We need the right tool for the right problem.

The situation may of course change, and if it did my position would change. You will have heard the Commissioner say the situation is constantly under

review and you can take it that the Commissioner, Premier and myself all judge we presently have what we need.

As a result we have requested precise UK military support. A Royal Fleet Auxiliary is making headway towards us and will bring her Wildcat Helicopter. The UK Foreign Office is paying and this airframe provides outstanding day and night surveillance providing top cover for Policing Operations and the ability to track fast boats. This is a strategic offer that the military can provide.

Separately we have had the UK's National Crime Agency arrive. They have worked with our Intelligence Branch helping further draw together the information we have on the gangs, developed from the new intelligence unit that recently became active supported by UK specialist trainers.

The National Crime Agency have a regional and global reach, are extremely well connected to US agencies and other Caribbean Governments so given that we are, unfortunately, now involved in a trans-regional, drug-driven, anti-gang operation, their support will be invaluable.

They, for instance, have been highly instrumental in advising us in terms of the one strategic asset that is vital for any trans-national and local operation against the drug and gun crime 'industry' – 'lawful intercept'. That, Judge authorised capability, will come on line once transparent, world class legislation is passed.

Given the Bahamas deployment, the Commissioner's judgement is that we don't immediately need more Tactical Firearms officers on the Island, to reinforce our own, beyond the ones we presently have. The Bahamas have sent sufficient and are the Force best placed – because of proximity, regional and cultural understanding – to immediately help.

However, following the Premier's and my request, UK policing are finalising a contingency plan for additional specialist Firearms police support to deploy forward if we need them.

It's good strategy to not deploy all your available force, but have a reserve, and that's what we presently have. Such Officers would also deploy if, for instance, we were to be hit by another Hurricane this season and if that were the case I would not want all our Policing 'eggs', deployed forward, in one basket.

The FCDO are also preparing and funding a further deployment of detectives, firearms trainers and other specialists to support our local police. In addition, the deployment of 24 UK-funded detectives, with integrated leadership, that will fall under local command, continues at pace. The first leadership elements of this will arrive very soon.

While armed officers provide the ability to suppress and arrest, it is this team of detectives that should provide the heart of any anti-gang operation.

Couple this with: a) intelligence now being provided through sources on the ground; b) future intelligence provided by those monitoring

telecommunications; c) intelligence collected from the aerial surveillance platform the UK are procuring, and; d) wash all this against intelligence provided across the region; and we will have built a Policing machine that can outmatch any gang. TCI will not be the safe haven gangsters thought it was.

Crime sits within of course a much wider societal picture and relying on the Police to continually suppress and arrest is no proper national strategy. If no other factor was taken into account, a projected 10 times growth in population – between 1980 and 2040 – in less than one lifetime – giving us one of the fastest growing populations in the Caribbean – was always going to bring very significant challenges.

That's before we take into account: our proximity to increasingly unstable neighbours, a region awash with guns and drugs where every Caribbean Island faces challenges, and where criminals seemingly are able to move easily throughout the region.

But beyond our geography and region there are problems we must 'own', that we can do something about. I believe the present Government is tackling these head on. How to regularise irregular shanty settlements; how to provide for a more equitable society; how to generate sustainable long term growth; how to make early interventions in our schools; how – through the Population and Status Commission – to both ensure our future immigration policy is rock-solidly fit for purpose, while also working out how we manage the issue of those who have lived, and will live their lives here, but cannot properly assimilate.

There is much more than that but the good news is, that this has all started. The National Security Secretariat provides for coherence across Government and their Permanent Secretary will give some insight into the work they are doing, on behalf of the Government, in coming weeks.

Finally I want to say this. Just at the moment I could not be more proud to be your Governor. From my first day I knew I could never be 'you', but I did promise I would do my best to support 'you' and commit to 'you'.

Much of what I normally say is about the extraordinary talent and potential we have in these Islands. Much of what I have just said is about external support. Just at the moment you deserve every bit of external support you have received, and you will receive, because you have been steadfast and resilient during five years of extraordinary pressure.

As a small Island community you defy the laws of gravity. Normally a disaster knocks such a community backwards to the point it can never quite get back to where it was. Not you.

In five years you have absorbed three hurricanes, two at Category 5 and one, a few weeks ago, at Category 3. We absorbed a global pandemic that stretched the Territories health system, a system totally unprepared set against our economy that was and is completely reliant on international travel.

We are presently absorbing an upswing in gang related murder that is alien to TCI but almost endemic to the region, at levels that almost no UK Police Force could tackle alone, and which has brought the problems of the region, in terms of drugs, gangs and guns, to our literal doorstep.

But look where we are and where we will be.

It was very hard for many in TCI, but there is almost no other nation who came out of the pandemic stronger than they went into it, or who dealt with it in the systematic and consistent way we did. No debt, visitor numbers up, globally high vaccination rates, brand enhanced, Tourist industry describing us as the best in the world.

God indeed saved us from the worst of Hurricane FIONA; yet seasoned veterans of Hurricanes had to notice how much better the Territories response was, and also how quickly we could bring in phased, outside support. That wasn't accidental but because lessons had been applied, local capability in say the Regiment built, and Government command and control had practiced over and over again.

We know how to manage and learn from crisis and we will do the same on crime. Crisis properly illuminates issues that cannot be ignored not just by us but by others. Three weeks ago, while we had great support from OPBAT on our borders, we were in this fight against crime broadly alone with very useful UK support.

Now we are very clearly in a fight but with a full range of partners, helping us, because they really do know that in this interconnected region we are all in this together. We are not recipients of charity, we are working with partners that know we are stronger together.

The UK support now flowing in – some of it long planned but now being realised: a big detective effort; access to intelligence; maritime surveillance support and the UK's equivalent of the FBI – the National Crime Agency – thoroughly engaged – does change the game.

And that is before we tip our hat to our friends in the Bahamas who are literally shoulder-to shoulder with our brave Tactical and Response officers, to Jamaica who stands ready, particularly in terms of intelligence, and to multiple US agencies, some who are here right here, right now, defending our borders.

The greatest crime would be to not seize the opportunity this crisis presents. The Premier and I can assure you, we do not intend to miss that. As the pandemic hit us, as the Hurricanes hit us, we will emerge stronger, because that is in the nature of these resilient by nature, Turks and Caicos Islands, and their indomitable residents, of which I am proud to be just one.

Governor Nigel Dakin delivers the speech to the media.