

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration

13 July 2014

Independence Service At St. Agnes In Overtown, Miami, Florida

3 p.m.

*Check Against Delivery*

I wish on behalf of our new Governor General Dame Marguerite Pindling, the Prime Minister Perry Christie and all Bahamians at home to wish you a happy independence day.

I want to thank the Consul General Ricardo Treco, the Deputy Consul General Sandra Carey and all the staff at the Consulate General for their work with the Bahamian community in organizing this event.

It is important for us to mark this occasion. It is a marker of the place from which we started and it tells us from whence we have come. Each year we pause at this time and ask the question: what do these stone mean?

Independence is not a static state of being; it is an active proposition. Each year, each month, each day, every minute in that day brings challenges and as Bahamians, loyal sons and daughters, we are called upon to meet those challenges and defend that independence. This is so for Bahamians at home and the responsibility does not end once you leave and come to another country. As a matter of fact, it becomes even more important.

It does not always come in big battles like the ones you read about in the history books, where armies and navies come and land and invade your shores and make you a captured people. These days there are more subtle and insidious incursions against which we have to guard, for which we have to teach our children and there are enemies without and within.

It is not “grandstanding” to speak up for The Bahamas. Those who make such an assertion are in fact raising questions about their own patriotism and dedication to our country.

Last year this time, we had to defend ourselves against the onslaught of some rogue elements living in the United States who having sought and received safe harbour and refuge in the United States believe that they are free to defame our country. We put them in their place. Thanks to you, we defended our country and its reputation. That fight continues this year as well, with continued mumblings of threats and boycotts and other nefarious consequences if The Bahamas does not comply with what these people want.

I say to them: never in a million years.

We will not be moved.

Within the past year, you have heard about the allegations of the spying on Bahamian telephone conversations and you have seen the responses from Bahamians and their discomfort about it. Some would have us be silent in the face of an allegation that unlawful conduct by a foreign state is taking place in our country.

Recently, the Prime Minister told U S diplomats that comments made about our investment climate were inappropriate, inaccurate and puzzling.

Then to the south of us, we are daily bombarded with undocumented aliens coming into The Bahamas from Haiti, it now appears guided by people within The Bahamas whose God is money and who will undermine their country for money.

We have spent nearly 250 million dollars over the past year for new boats to combat this menace and to combat the pillaging of our fish by citizens from the south of us from the Dominican Republic.

Notwithstanding all of that, however, the Secretary of State of the United States John Kerry has described the relationship between The Bahamas and the United States as a good one. I agree, and the fundamentals have not been affected by the bumps in the road. We are joined at the hip by geography which we cannot change.

Nevertheless we make the case for Bahamians. You who are Bahamians overseas have a role to play. It remains the view that a Bahamian anywhere whether at home or abroad is a Bahamian who can help.

Our country has provided us with great benefits, education and training that we can use around the world so no one need feel embarrassed or

ashamed that they felt the need to leave and find a new life abroad. We are proud of you all the same.

We speak with U S authorities on a regular basis about access to this country by Bahamians and their treatment here. I have said in another forum that even if the 370,000 of us decided all to move to the United States it would not adversely affect the US in any material way. So the arcane and difficult visa procedures for Bahamians seem not on the face of it to make sense. It remains a foreign policy aim to improve access to this country for education and work for all Bahamians.

At the same time, we ought to realize that if we propose such a move for Bahamians to live, work and visit here, then reciprocity is often the cry. Are we willing to make such a reciprocal offer?

Until then, the case must continue to be made for a clear, transparent and courteous immigration procedure for Bahamians who wish to come to this country in accordance with international rules and norms.

At the same time Bahamians must not violate the rules of the United States. We must know that those who want to come here face a system which presumes that whether for visiting or not, the rebuttable presumption is that you are coming here to live. That presumption is rebutted by evidence that you present at the window for the interview for the visa. Too often Bahamians present themselves to American authorities, not knowing the rules and believing that the informality of our country applies to this system. This system has rules, those rules are often subjectively applied; they are designed that way. It is important then to know the rules and follow those rules.

The Bahamas government can do what it can to urge the authorities in this country to treat Bahamians with respect, objectivity and with courtesy during these processes but Bahamians must know and recognize that this is the U S not The Bahamas. Know this country's rules and abide by them.

All of this is pertinent to the fight for the independence of The Bahamas. We are the best little nation on earth. We would have our citizens treated in that way and we would have it no other way.

I thank you all again. I wish you a happy independence day.