

STATEMENT

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Press Conference Statement Deputy Premier Honourable Julian Fraser, RA 48th Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of CARICOM 28th February, 2025

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Premier

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Ladies and gentleman

A pleasant good morning.

I am very pleased to join Premier Wheatley for the very first time at one of his press conferences as a Member of his Government

Since my appointment as Deputy Premier and Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Climate Change nearly five months ago, I have been hard at work on my portfolio.

On a different occasion I would be happy to participate in another press conference to update you on the work of my Ministry, should the Premier extend another invitation.

However, today it is my great pleasure to say a few words about my participation at the 48th Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) that took place just last week in Barbados.

I represented the Premier and Government at that critical meeting of Caribbean states and territories when the world is experiencing such uncertainty.

It is important for me to state at the outset that regional cooperation is a pillar of our international affairs. The Premier has overall responsibility for those areas of international affairs over which the local Government exercises its authority, but each individual Minister has a role to play within our respective portfolios, whether it be health, education, climate change, energy or trade.

Needless to say, on a great many issues, the Virgin Islands is best served by coordinating with our neighbours because certain problems are bigger than any one country or territory can handle on its own.

CARICOM's collective response to the Covid-19 pandemic, international advocacy on climate change, response to irregular migration from Haiti and Venezuela, tackling crime and gun violence, and the list goes on, are all examples where regional cooperation is in our interest. So, it is extremely important that we remain engaged with our neighbours.

The Virgin Islands' Associate Membership in CARICOM provides us with access to high-level regional forums such as the Heads of Government meeting where we discuss our challenges at the highest political level and take coordinated action.

CARICOM's 48th Regular Meeting of the Heads of Government was chaired by the dynamic Prime Minister of Barbados The Honourable Mia Amor Mottley and took place against the backdrop of the unfolding trade wars, conflict in Europe and instability in the Middle East.

Our discussions covered, among other things, trade and economic cooperation; regional transportation; crime and regional security; climate resilience; energy; food security; education; tourism; and technology.

Present to discuss the big geopolitical issues were United Nations (UN) Secretary-General H.E. António Guterres and President of the European Commission H.E. Ursula von der Leyen.

They have pledged to support the region on climate change, sustainable development and stabilisation of Haiti. They would welcome the region's support in upholding the rules-based international order with our strong moral voice.

A key issue was disruption to international trade by potential tariffs, especially given the Caribbean's high import dependency. CARICOM Heads took the decision to review the bloc's trade policies with the United States (US) and other trade partners to assess the impact of global economic tensions on the Caribbean.

Regional security was also raised as critical, particularly the situation in Haiti. CARICOM remains committed to helping to restore security and stability. Here at home, we have felt the impact of the ongoing instability in Haiti when those fleeing violence have arrived on our shores. We sympathize with the small Haitian community here on island and with their relatives back home who are experiencing human insecurity every day from the gangs in control there.

For the region as a whole, crime and security are major concerns. The proliferation of illicit firearms, organized crime, and gang activity continues to threaten public safety and economic stability. CARICOM acknowledged that stronger intelligence-sharing and law enforcement collaboration is needed. It was agreed that some steps would be taken in this regard. We do participate in CARICOM IMPACS that has some responsibility for coordination on regional security.

Also, in attendance at the Heads of Government meetings was the outgoing Secretary-General of the Commonwealth H.E. Baroness Patricia Scotland, a dear friend of the Virgin Islands. She has visited us in the past on various occasions. There were also representatives from Canada, Saudi Arabia, Africa and Latin America.

The high-level of international participation in the CARICOM meeting demonstrated the growing importance and weight of the bloc in global affairs.

Many other things were discussed, but I found our discussion on technology and innovation to be extremely important to the future of the Virgin Islands and region. We met with a number of investors from Silicon Valley who see great economic potential in the Caribbean if we can quickly adopt new and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and apply them to areas such as healthcare that would give the region a competitive advantage.

Based on the presentations that I saw, the Virgin Islands has a real shot at becoming a centre of excellence in healthcare if we embrace the technological revolution that is currently taking place, but we have to do so early so early enough that we capture a share of the market.

In terms of examples of Caribbean countries pushing forward with technology, I was highly impressed with Guyana's progress in establishing the Guyana Digital School, which is an initiative expanding digital learning across the Caribbean. It provides access to online education and technical training, equipping people with digital skills to engage in emerging industries. Shortly I will be sharing what I gleaned from the discussion and presentations with the Premier and Honourable Sharie DeCastro, the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs.

In terms of CARICOM's relationship with the Virgin Islands, I was very encouraged by CARICOM's support for the Associate Members, especially CARICOM's firm commitment to defending the Virgin Islands' right to self-determination and upholding the principle of self-governance. Their solidarity with us is very much appreciated and it is helpful to know that our neighbours stand with us.

The final point I want to mention on the CARICOM meeting is that I was very pleased to witness the preliminary accession of Martinique as an Associate Member of CARICOM. When their full accession is complete, it will deepen the island's cooperation and engagement with the rest of the Caribbean.

Separate from wider congratulations that were made, the political leaders of all the Associate Members present congratulated the President of the Regional Council of

Martinique Mr. Serge Letchimy on this achievement for the Government and people of Martinique.

The CARICOM family continues to grow and support that.

In closing, I once again want to say it was a pleasure for me to represent the Premier and Territory at his request.

We are in a very good place with CARICOM in large part due to the Premier's efforts and the consistent engagement of our CARICOM Ambassador Special Envoy Mr. Benito Wheatley who attended alongside me.

With that I will end my remarks.

Thank you for your kind attention.