



REMARKS BY

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DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

AT THE

**HONORARY CONSULAR CORPS
ANNUAL CHRISTMAS LUNCHEON 2009**

Lyford Cay Club

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Nassau, The Bahamas

HONORARY CONSULAR CORPS ANNUAL CHRISTMAS LUNCHEON 2009

**Dean of the Diplomatic Corps,
Dean of the Honorary Consular Corps,
Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Members of the Honorary Consular Corps,
Special Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Friends,**

1. I believe we can all agree that this year has been a difficult one for all of us, starting with the deepening of the global economic crisis and, finally, the realisation by most of the extent of the impact of climate change on the world.

2. In joining you today once again at this annual Christmas luncheon, I wish to express not only my pleasure in being with you but also my desire to seek more attention and involvement from you, able representatives of your Governments here in The Bahamas as we seek to overcome the challenges that keep emerging in the face of the existing crises.

3. Before I continue, please let us keep Mr Herve Kelecom, the Honorary Consul of Belgium, in our prayers. Let us also warmly remember the life, times, and contributions of Sir Clement T. Maynard (October), one of our former Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

Excellencies, Honorary Consuls, Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. The overarching theme of my presentation to you centres on co-operation. When it does not do so directly, it refers to the components, of which you are an integral part, required to ensure the strengthening of the Ministry's foundation to increase our capacity for greater co-operation and results.

Diplomatic/Consular Representation

5. Let me begin with mutual representation. The Diplomatic Corps in The Bahamas increased by one this year, with the Sovereign Military Order of Malta joining its ranks a few weeks ago in late November. Your Excellency Frank Crothers, welcome. At the same time, I also wish to acknowledge and welcome in our midst the newly appointed Ambassador of the United States of America, Ms Nicole Avant. Welcome to you, Excellency. The International Office for Migration was granted legal authority this year to establish its presence in The Bahamas, evidence of our continuing and deepened relationship on migration matters. Congratulations are extended to its new Programme Manager, Ms Agnes McKenzie.

6. The Bahamas, for her part, continued the exercise of augmenting members of her diplomatic team to fulfil our vision for and commitment to participation with the international community. We appointed the former Senator and Parliamentary Secretary, Ms Katherine (Kay) Forbes-Smith as Consul-General of The Bahamas in Atlanta – with responsibility for Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Tennessee – thereby concluding the appointment of Mr Michael Young, who served us well as Honorary Consul in Atlanta.

International Meetings

7. In the months from December 2008 to the present, I or my staff attended or assisted in preparing The Bahamas for a number of high-level international meetings covering a wide range of issues: Human Rights, the global financial crisis, climate change, food and energy security, the UN Millennium Development Goals, and combating hunger, poverty and international terrorism. Included among these meetings were: the First Summit of Latin America and the Caribbean in Brazil in December 2008 – hailed as the first such intra-hemispheric Summit since the Encounter of Two Worlds over five hundred years ago; the Ministerial-level Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Cuba; the UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva in March; the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in April; the CARICOM Council for Foreign and Community Relations in May; the 39th General Assembly of the Organisation of American States in Honduras in June, which also addressed the issue of its membership criteria; the 64th Regular Session of the United Nations General Assembly; and the 60th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Trinidad and Tobago in November. As you know, we have a delegation being led by the Prime Minister at the critical 15th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, Denmark. The outcomes of this meeting, as with all the others mentioned, will influence and guide the manner in which we will be conducting our overall affairs and our participation in meetings in the near future. The decisions of these meetings will also result in practical impact at the national level as they contribute to enhancing national capacity.

Meetings hosted by The Bahamas

8. The Bahamas hosted her share of meetings of import, including the Commonwealth Local Government Meeting in Freeport (May), the 2009 FIFA Congress (May), the Inter-American Bar Association (June), and the 2009 Miss Universe Beauty Pageant (July). This reaffirms our capacity, and our commitment when called upon, to host major international meetings and events, despite our size.

Bilateral Meetings

9. On the bilateral front, the People's Republic of China's Vice-Premier Hui of the State Council came to us in February, matching the then-highest level of representation paying an official call on our shores. Agreements signed at this time fell in line with our domestic goals. That visit was surpassed in level by the Official Goodwill Visit to The Bahamas by Chairman Wu of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in September and focussed on parliamentary links and exchange.

10. In April of this year, I had the honour of welcoming a United States Congressional visit led by the Honourable Congressman John Conyers, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee. The visit provided the Congressman and his delegation the opportunity to hear first hand about the challenges faced by The Bahamas in respect of a number of critical issues such as illegal migration and trafficking in illicit drugs and weapons. His delegation also met with the Health Minister for insights into The Bahamas' healthcare system, which he indicated would inform their efforts at healthcare reform in the United States.

11. Australia graced our maritime territory in August with the presence of one of her senior frigates, the HMAS Sydney, in the Operation Northern Trident 2009 international naval exercise, which took her crew on a once-in-a-generation exercise to our part of the world.

12. Also making a working visit to The Bahamas this year was the Foreign Minister of Haiti. During his two-day visit at the start of October, he met with officials from several government Ministries and Departments in an all-day session at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Meeting was very productive and a number of practical measures were agreed to address matters of mutual interest for our respective countries.

Strengthening of MFA

13. These international and bilateral meetings also provide opportunities for exposure and training. Some of the training opportunities taken advantage of this year by my Ministry were offered by China, Germany, Japan, the Caribbean Community and the World Trade Organisation. Additionally, the rationalisation of the work programme of my Ministry, reflecting my portfolio responsibilities and wider Government Manifesto priorities, is being confirmed progressively.

14. With the use of technology and applied manpower and procedures, we have expanded our passport service, domestically and in some of our Missions Overseas, to date: Miami, New York, and Atlanta. My Ministry is continuing to overcome the challenges in implementing the intricate system in Nassau, Freeport and in other Family Island centres. The Bahamian public has witnessed major improvements in the delivery of their documents.

15. We have carried through with the establishment of our new Consulate General in Atlanta, which will assist with new and longstanding interests of consequence in that part of the United States, including familial, education, tourism, business, trade and cultural interests.

16. On other occasions, I will inform you on other matters of interest to come on stream that will continue to cause our overall efforts to be more fruitful, such as the strategic opening of additional offices overseas and the attachment of more Bahamians to international organisations.

Excellencies, Consuls, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Treaties and Agreements

17. April 2009 saw The Bahamas and the European Commission agree a provisional application arrangement for the Short-stay Visa Waiver Agreement. The final Agreement was signed on 28th May in Brussels and implemented with effect from 1st June, 2009. I can confirm to you that more than few Bahamians took immediate advantage of this to expand their personal or business horizons eastward. Our thanks have been extended to representatives of those EU Countries that graced our shores personally or to whose countries we visited since. Nonetheless, I wish to have you convey our heartfelt thanks once more to your relevant Capitals.

18. Also in April 2009, The Bahamas ratified the UN Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, or simply, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

19. An Asset Sharing Agreement with Canada under The Bahamas/Canada Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty was concluded, thereby, establishing a procedure for the sharing of assets confiscated under joint law enforcement operations.

20. An Agreement was signed with the International Organisation for Migration to assist with the re-integration of returnees to The Bahamas, so that they might become productive members of our society.

21. A large number of agreements and Memoranda of Understanding were signed with China this year to enhance our relationship in the areas of agricultural co-operation, diplomatic visas, economic and technical co-operation, infrastructural works, and investment promotion and protection.

22. A five-year strategic plan through the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) was signed, which supports men, women and children on treatment. This builds on the established sustainable national HIV/AIDS response in The Bahamas. We welcome and appreciate this year's

contribution that will target laboratories, gather key HIV/AIDS data, and develop the skills of healthcare workers.

23. Our dialogue with Cuba continues and is being facilitated with an agreement on the waiving of visas for holders of diplomatic passports.

24. The Bahamas' treaty list, enshrining international obligations and national commitments, may be consulted or downloaded from the Ministry's website, www.mfabahamas.org.

Excellencies, Consuls, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Free Trade

25. The Bahamas is continuing her efforts in earnest to become a full member of the World Trade Organisation. We are seeking to ensure a smooth entry into the WTO on terms that take into account the fact that we are a developing country, vulnerable to external economic shocks, as well as natural disasters and the effects of climate change. We have taken a number of steps towards WTO accession, including a comprehensive review of trade-related legislation, and the establishment of trade-related administrative structures in both the public and the private sectors. Given the importance of the 7th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation (Minister of State Laing) in early December, we sent a Ministerial delegation to participate in the proceedings. We also are continuing to consider actively the establishment of a Permanent Mission in Geneva to facilitate the accession process. We call on all you WTO members present to have your Capitals support our accession process on terms compatible with our development needs and objectives, and the welfare of the Bahamian people.

26. In the interim, the first round of negotiations to conclude the new CARICOM/Canada Trade and Development Agreement were held in Barbados in early November. This agreement will be a successor to the existing CARIBCAN arrangement, under which the Member States of CARICOM, including The Bahamas, benefit from duty-free access to the Canadian market for certain products.

27. As regards the Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Commission, The Bahamas' services offer has been accepted by the Commission, just over a year after the signing of the EPA by The Bahamas. The acceptance of the services offer, which will be annexed to the completed agreement, means that we can now move to the next stage of implementation of the EPA, which will involve, *inter alia*, the liberalisation over a certain period of time of a number of key services sectors of the Bahamian economy toward the enhancement of competition and the development of new services industries.

Global Economic Crisis

28. The fallout for The Bahamas from the global economic and financial crisis has been considerable. The sharp downturn in tourism has resulted in a sharp increase in unemployment, and a steep decline in revenue. As I stated during the 64th UN General Assembly, the Government of The Bahamas acted quickly to soften the impact of the international economic downturn on our population. We took appropriate steps to ensure the continued integrity of the domestic financial system; we accelerated planned capital works to generate employment and economic activity; and we increased targeted social relief to those most disadvantaged by the crisis.

29. The Government also created a National Temporary Jobs Programme and several other related programmes to stimulate the economy and reduce unemployment. In addition to providing targeted fiscal stimulus, the programme also was designed to provide training and work experience, to improve the long-term employment prospects of the participants.

30. In implementing all of these programmes, the Government has exercised appropriate fiscal restraint and private sector partnership, so as to ensure sustainability in the medium- and longer term, and to ensure that the economy would be well placed to respond swiftly to any upturn in the global economy. In this regard, we are heartened by some very early signs of global economic recovery.

Financial Services

31. The Bahamas has now signed ten (10) Tax Information Exchange Agreements in pursuit of the Government's commitment to have The Bahamas removed from the OECD "grey list" of countries who are deemed not to be fully compliant with international tax standards, without delay. Agreements have been signed with Argentina, Belgium, China, France, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, San Marino, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We are pleased that six of these agreements are with OECD members, and that we are the first country to sign an agreement of this type with China. The Bahamas is presently negotiating TIEA's with other countries and will have signed her quota of these agreements by the First Quarter of 2010.

32. The Bahamas remains an international financial jurisdiction renowned for efficiency, professionalism and high standards of service. The Bahamas also reaffirms her commitment to continuing the dialogue with the international community regarding a level playing field in the continuing development of international standards in respect of transparency and effective information exchange in tax matters.

33. As for Intellectual Property Rights, The Bahamas has brought into force the Copyright Act 2004, with effect from 1st October, 2009. By virtue of this, The Bahamas has become compliant with international standards for the protection of Intellectual Property.

Maritime Affairs/Borders

34. In the area of the formal establishment of the official maritime borders of The Bahamas, we continued to make progress on the necessary work to prepare for negotiations to delimit our boundaries with Cuba and Turks and Caicos. Negotiations with the Republic of Cuba resumed on 10 and 11 June, 2009. Negotiations with these countries will continue into 2010.

35. The Bahamas was also able to meet the deadline for submission of the necessary preliminary documentation indicating that we intend to extend our claim to the outer limits of the Continental Shelf beyond 200 nautical miles (subject to negotiations with adjacent states) to the UN Secretary-General. The importance of this to the future of the Bahamian people is that it is the first step in the process for establishing jurisdiction over the continental shelf for exploration and exploitation of all non-living resources of the seabed and the subsoil of the shelf, including oil and gas and minerals, as well as certain sedentary marine species.

Excellencies, Consuls, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Climate Change and Natural Disasters

36. The Bahamas continues to play an active role in discussions related to climate change, and the sustainable development of small island developing states. The Bahamas remains acutely vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including the increase in the number, frequency and ferocity of hurricanes impacting our country and region over the last two decades. Restoration and recovery efforts required as a result of these extreme events have taken a toll in the hundreds of millions of dollars over the past decade alone, diverting scarce resources from other critically important national development programmes, and compromising our efforts towards sustainable development. The fact that this region was spared the ravages of hurricanes and other major natural disasters this year may be indicative of brewing changes. The Bahamas and the other Countries in the region have used this time to strengthen the procedures

established to confront natural disasters. Moreover and consequently, The Bahamas has participated actively in the discussions leading up to the Copenhagen Summit, and is being represented, as indicated, at the highest level at the Summit, demonstrating our commitment to concluding a legally-binding successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol.

37. As grave an issue for the entire world this year is the H1N1 (Swine Flu) pandemic announced by the World Health Organisation in June, but which had its beginnings in Mexico in April. The world is diligently working to stem this pandemic and is calling for concerted efforts by all Countries to safeguard their nationals. We are heeding that call, and the attention given by our health and tourism sectors has kept The Bahamas' nationals and visitors alike safe and appropriately treated where required thus far.

Security

38. The Bahamas continued to take major steps toward contributing to international and national security. I mentioned the ratification of the CWC. With respect to her international obligations on the issue of prevention of the financing of terrorism, The Bahamas submitted her fifth report on the implementation of the anti-terrorism resolution 1373 which updated the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee on Bahamas actions in this regard. This is one of the criteria used by the international community in determining the quality of international financial centres.

39. Similarly, work has also been completed giving effect to UN Security Council sanctions against Iran, North Korea, and the Democratic People's Republic of Congo, among others.

40. Following up on her becoming party to a number of important anti-terrorism treaties in 2008, The Bahamas will chair the OAS Inter-American Committee against Terrorism (CICTE) come February 2010. Among her current responsibilities as Vice-Chair of CICTE, The Bahamas identified the theme of "Public-Private Partnerships in the Fight against Terrorism" for the 10th Regular Session of CICTE scheduled for March 2010 at the OAS Headquarters in Washington, DC. We also will have to draft the Declaration, and organise the convening of, and the documentation, for the Session.

Piracy

41. An issue that harks back to centuries past and that has returned to the fore is piracy. The Bahamas has the third largest fleet in the world and has therefore experienced problems with pirates with increasing frequency over the last twelve months. The United Nations and other international bodies are now working to find countermeasures that protect international shipping without escalating matters, while also recognising that the solution is a long term one, that is, stability in Somalia. The Bahamas is participating in this process.

Human Rights

42. Following the review of The Bahamas' human rights record under the UN Commission on Human Rights Universal Periodic Review process, which occurred during the first week of December 2008, and in keeping with the commitments made in Manifesto 2007, the Ministry worked to secure Government's approval to become party to a number of multilateral conventions including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. We have also signed the Convention against Torture. With these actions, The Bahamas has therefore already addressed three of the recommendations made by the Human Rights Commission by ratifying the international covenants and signing the torture convention. The Bahamas delivered a progress report on its implementation of other recommendations emanating from its review at the tenth session of the Human Rights Council in March 2009, which was well received. The report was adopted at the 10th Session of the HRC meeting in May 2009.

Women's Affairs

43. My Ministry continues with its role of facilitating links between the Government of The Bahamas and the International Community and International Organisations in regards to Women's Rights. Developments nationally continue to be productive, through the enforcement of our legislation domestically, and enriched by the continuing appointment of the Honourable Loretta Butler-Turner, Minister of State for Labour and Social Development, to the OAS's Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), and the meeting of our reporting obligations to the UN on the elimination of discrimination against women.

Excellencies, Consuls, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Candidacies

44. More good news came in the form of the success experienced by The Bahamas in all her international bids for posts in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), and the Presidency of the 35th General Conference of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). We wish once more to extend thanks to the Countries you represent for the invaluable support, indispensable for these elections.

45. The Bahamas confirms that she will be intensifying both the tapping of resources of the International System and bringing her national priorities to influence the System, in the areas of social development, environmental sustainability, public safety, and protection and diversification of her service-based economy through international shipping.

Caribbean/CARICOM

46. The Bahamas will be hosting the next Caribbean-China Consultation, a forum that affords these two partners to advance their relations.

47. The Bahamas is continuing her preparations to ensure her fullest and favourable participation in the World Expo 2010 being held in Shanghai, China, from May through October.

Excellencies, Consuls, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends,

48. I wish to share one thing more with you: A part of my activities has also included, and been influenced by, an underlying priority to promulgate the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the wider public, to let them know why we exist, and that we are there to help them understand the reciprocal impact of the world outside The Bahamas. You are part of that world and I would, at present, reiterate my call for a greater involvement by you, members of the Diplomatic Corps and the Honorary Consular Corps, in the further development and economic diversification of the Bahamian society. We see by all that I highlighted in my report that we had a busy year and we still have much work ahead of us. All the players on the global stage are calling for co-operation on all fronts. I, therefore, call on you all to increase your contact and co-operation with my Ministry and me in a dynamic, result-oriented, and sustained manner.

49. As I close these remarks, I wish to congratulate Ambassadors and Honorary Consuls whose countries had successful elections domestically and in the international arena. The trust placed upon us challenges us to maintain hard-fought gains and be examples of the best the International Community can offer to a world challenged with grave economic, financial, energy, food and other social crises. May such a collective commitment to excellence and sustainable results continue to guide us for an even better new year.

50. As always, please be assured this commitment also means the undiminished co-operation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Government of The Bahamas in the pursuit of policies and measures for mutual benefit.

51. I thank you, and I wish all the best of the Season to you and yours.