



**UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR) AND
INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)
CARIBBEAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE PROTECTION OF
VULNERABLE PERSONS IN MIXED MIGRATION FLOWS
PROMOTING COOPERATION AND IDENTIFICATION OF GOOD
PRACTICES
NASSAU, THE BAHAMAS**

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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY
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THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS**

Protocol having been observed, I extend a warm and cordial welcome on behalf of the Government and the People of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. I am particularly pleased and encouraged to see all of the countries represented here today which indicates that you are also very committed to this initiative of the protection of vulnerable person in mixed migration- promoting cooperation and identification of good practices.

I would like to thank the International Organisation for Migration and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees for selecting The Bahamas as the host country

for this Regional Conference, which is considered to be the first of its kind held in the Caribbean Region.

As we all will agree, mixed migration is a very complex issue, and it deserves a great deal of attention and necessary action. That is why an occasion like the present, which brings together persons from the relevant agencies in our respective countries, is vital in the efforts to effectively manage, and comprehensively meet the myriad of challenges that result from unregulated and irregular migration.

The Bahamas has been a Member State of the International Organisation for Migration since 2004, and has actively participated in conferences and programmes.

The IOM supports, in part, capacity-building activities for the Government, and, as a result, best practices were established aimed toward a holistic approach to the management of migratory flows to The Bahamas. For this, the Government is very appreciative.

The Government is also appreciative of the assistance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees especially with respect to matters surrounding asylum seekers and refugees in the Country. Since becoming a

State Party to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees in September 1993, the country has collaborated in with the UNHCR on training, legal and technical assistance. The UNHCR has been instrumental in assisting the Government to find durable solutions to persons in The Bahamas who meet the international standard to be recognized as refugees.

I take this opportunity now to give you an insight into The Bahamas' experience with irregular migration.

This country comprises more than 700 islands, cays and rocks, and spreads over a great distance of some 100,000 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean. This makes the archipelago the largest of its kind in the region, and one of

the most extensive in the world. It is this unique archipelagic configuration that, in this context, presents a challenge with effectively controlling the influx of irregular migrants entering by sea. The Bahamas' proximity to the United States is a key factor in contributing to irregular migration. It is this proximity that is often exploited by economic migrants.

Authorities have observed that the overwhelming majority of irregular migrants attempting to enter The Bahamas are detected in the southern Bahamas around the Islands of Inagua, Mayaguana, the Exuma chain, and then to a lesser degree the Central Bahamas. These islands

continue to be the recipients of smuggled migrants of various nationalities of the region, as well as those as from far away as the Asian- Pacific region. These individuals may or may not arrive with relevant identification documents. As an added concern, such operations sometimes include the smuggling of narcotics and arms into the Country.

The mode of transportation has gradually changed, as irregular migrants and smugglers who once used sailing sloops, now trend toward more motor driven and steel-hulled vessels. From observation, these vessels would carry about 30 to 250 migrants at once. While we continue

to experience the mass entry of irregular migrants, the entry of smaller groups presents the opportunity for the migrants to go undetected while established underground networks on various islands assist these individuals with integrating into the migrant communities.

As you would imagine, the financial burden of such migration is staggering. The Government has spent over \$14 million for the period 2000 to 2012, to repatriate more than 67,600 illegal immigrants. In 2011 alone the Government spent more than \$900 thousand on repatriation exercises for more than 3,200 foreign nationals.

The Bahamas has not been a recipient of a significant number of Trafficking in Persons victims when compared to other countries worldwide. Nonetheless, in keeping with international standards, and in an effort to ensure the proper protection of such victims, legislation was passed for the Trafficking in Persons (Prevention and Suppression) Act 2008, which adopted the broad definition of “Trafficking in Persons” as set out in the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Girls, supplementing the United Nations Convention on Transnational Crime. This Act

specifically prohibits trafficking in persons in all aspects, and is applicable to men, women and children.

To strengthen and enforce this Act, in 2011, the Government established an Inter-Ministry Trafficking in Persons Committee, also known as the TIP Committee, which acts as the coordinating body for policy matters and makes policy recommendations to the Government to strengthen national initiatives to prevent and suppress trafficking in persons and punish persons guilty of such actions. The Committee comprises senior Government officials from the Ministries of National Security, Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Finance, Social Services, Health,

the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, the Royal Bahamas Police Force, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force, and Customs. Non-Government Organisations are also invited to participate in the work of the Committee. Additionally, in March of last year the Trafficking in Persons Task Force was established to serve as an operational body to address trafficking in persons cases, ranging from the identification of victims to the prosecution of alleged traffickers.

The Inter-Ministry Committee on Trafficking in Persons and the Trafficking in Persons Task Force have formulated and amalgamated guidelines comprising broad

procedures to guide the relevant agencies of Government on practical action to be taken in respect of trafficking in persons, including identification of victims and potential victims, care for children, monitoring and investigations. It should also be noted that the Government has implemented a plan to provide appropriate services for victims of trafficking in persons and dependent children accompanying the victims for the years 2013 to 2016. The Plan includes among other things, procedures on providing appropriate housing, psychological counseling and medical assistance.

In an effort to strengthen and remain proactive in the fight against trafficking in persons, in November of last year the Commissioner of Police conducted a Review Meeting to recall actions taken by the Police Force, and determine how these actions could be improved upon.

The Government of The Bahamas cannot express enough how important the issue of migration is, especially as it concerns the protection of vulnerable groups. Compliance with international standards remains key, and it can therefore be assured that appropriate guidelines are followed in every case. It is in this regard that every effort is taken by the Government to improve upon the efficiency

of apprehension, screening, detention, interviews and repatriation exercises.

Irregular migrants apprehended by sea or in the communities are interviewed by appropriately trained personnel from the Department of Immigration. In keeping with protocols developed in consultation with the UNHCR, persons with a well-founded fear of persecution upon their return to their country of origin have been granted refugee status, and long-term durable solutions found. Individuals who do not meet the standards of political refugee are repatriated to their country of origin.

The Bahamas, like some of the countries represented here, continues to experience major challenges with irregular migration flows. The increase in the occurrences of mixed migration has levied a tremendous strain on the Country's already limited resources. The instances when authorities must process mixed migratory flows consisting of asylum seekers, economic migrants and Trafficking in Persons victims, magnifies the need for additional human resources in the forms of immigration, investigation and enforcement officers.

It is especially challenging for border patrol authorities to effectively monitor and protect the large maritime borders with insufficient patrol vessels and other necessary

equipment. Directly related to this challenge is the prevalence of local small vessels being used to smuggle migrants to land from larger vessels offshore.

In recognizing these and other challenges, we have found several practices useful in the management of migration flows in particular, regarding the detection and apprehension of migrants at sea. Bahamian authorities make every effort to increase patrol in waters identified as regular routes for migrants, as it is anticipated that during certain times of the year, there would be large influxes of migrants. In the past, a spotter airplane was used to determine the location of migrant vessels, prior to deploying patrol vessels.

The Government cooperates with regional partners as mandated by international conventions, very specifically with the US Government Agencies, in joint and multilateral efforts to restrict the illicit traffic of migrants, arms and drugs through The Bahamas. The long-standing bilateral relationship with the United States has culminated in a comprehensive maritime agreement. This agreement is inclusive of Operation Bahamas Turks and Caicos, also known as OPBAT, a tripartite counter drug operation between The Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and the United States, where the U.S. in part assists with the detection and interdiction of irregular immigration and

search-and-rescue cases. The Bahamas Defence Force has also benefited significantly from extensive maritime training through the US sponsored annual Tradewinds Exercise with Caribbean partners.

In October 2011, The Bahamas and the Republic of Cuba signed a historic Delimitation Agreement, demarcating maritime boundaries between the two countries. In terms of accountability and interdiction, this Agreement was pivotal in improving capacity of both countries to patrol the full extent of territory which falls under their respective jurisdictions.

In light of the maritime challenges and issues the country faces, the Government pledged to invest some \$200 million dollars in capital works and assets procurement for the Royal Bahamas Defence Force. Assets include among other resources, much needed patrol vessels. Once acquired and in service, the additional resources are expected to amplify the capabilities of the Defence Force. Additionally, earlier this month the United States Northern Command donated more than \$900 thousand worth of maritime equipment including vessels and replacement parts. It is these and other forms of donations and technical assistance that support The Bahamas in her

efforts to better detect and deter transnational illicit activities.

As stated earlier, the Government of The Bahamas recognizes the complexity of mixed migration flows and considers the protection of vulnerable persons in these flows a priority. It is therefore the view of the Government that effectively controlling irregular migration by way of the maritime environment in The Bahamas and wider Caribbean will require the continued tightening of security via sustained air and sea patrols with the assistance of bases established along strategic checkpoints to facilitate patrol efforts; while the stemming of migrant smuggling

will require enhanced cooperation between affected nations through effective information sharing, effective communication networks, and joint operations, all of which are being addressed.

Furthermore, in order to properly manage irregular migration we must thoroughly identify the “push” factors and social ills that contribute to involuntary migration and systematically deal with them. In anticipation of this, irregular migration is expected to remain relatively high in the region as long as origin countries of irregular migrants continue to experience political, economic and social instability. With The Bahamas lying next to the world’s

wealthiest nation, it is expected that we will continue to be a natural bridge for the fulfillment of dreams and aspirations of many migrants, who seek to gain entrance into the United States.

There is much we can learn from each other during this Conference, as it is on occasions of this kind that we are reminded of how interconnected we are as a Region. As well, it is our different views, analyses and experiences that foster the environment to produce solutions to such complex issues. I again commend the IOM and UNHCR for their initiative in bringing together the major stakeholders in this effort. It speaks to the fact that no

longer can the philosophies of the previous years and decades be applied to today's complex issue of irregular migration and related challenges. I therefore invite all of you to use this opportunity to delve into the sessions, which are desired to yield and foster new paradigms for adjusting to the rapidly changing irregular migration situation in the Region and world.

Once again, I welcome you to this Regional Conference, and I trust that you will have a successful and stimulating two days.

I thank you.

