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Citizen Security

(Reprinted from the 2017 Budget Address)

Introduction

The primary obligation of the State is to provide an appropriate, and effective, framework for an acceptable level of citizen security. Citizens and visitors to St. Vincent and the Grenadines must be made to feel reasonably safe and secure in their homes, their places of work and at leisure, and as they generally go about their lawful business in a free society.

Mr. Speaker, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a small country in which we tend to know one another face-to-face. We are overwhelmingly a law-abiding society. We are an educated and disciplined people. We have a sound system of law and order; and the Police Force is reasonably resourced with personnel and equipment. Yet, we have a level of criminal violence, perpetuated by a small minority, in our country; this is deeply troubling. We must do much, much better, in curbing the incidence of criminal violence committed by this hardy minority. I take this matter very seriously.

It is correctly and widely accepted that the fight against crime is not in the province of the State apparatus alone. This fight is an all-encompassing enterprise involving the State institutions, the family, church, school, community, the mass media of communication, civil society, private security firms, businesses and labour, and individuals themselves in a partnership with appropriate regional and international institutions and government. We must all be on the same page in this fight within the context of a democratic society.

State Institutions

The principal State institutions engaged actively in the quest for optimal citizen safety and security are: the Law Courts, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Financial Intelligence Unit, the machinery for the administration of justice, the National Commission on Crime Prevention, the Police Force, in concert with relevant regional and international entities, including the Regional Security System, IMPACS (Implementation Agency for CARICOM Security), and INTERPOL. Each of these State institutions is reasonably well-resourced and performs creditably.

The SVG Police Force is on the front-line of crime fighting. On the police establishment are 836 police officers, 15 Traffic Wardens, 20 Rural Constables,

99 Fire Officers, and 91 Coast Guard Officers, a grand total of 1,061 persons. The recurrent budget for the Police Force in 2017 is \$27.6 million, for the Fire Services \$3.7 million, and for the Coast Guard \$4.2 million, an aggregate for these law and order institutions of \$35.5 million. Additionally, the Prison Services have 131 prison officers and an annual recurrent budget of \$5.8 million. In the 2017 Budget, the functional classification, "Public Order and Safety", has an impressive allocation of \$63.8 million or 9 percent of the total recurrent budget, inclusive of amortization and Sinking Fund contribution.

Mr. Speaker, in 2003, the government elaborated, and caused to be approved in this Honourable House a National Strategy on Crime Prevention. It has been updated and refined on an ongoing basis. This many-sided Strategy and consequential Work Plan have been, and are being, implemented. But any Strategy and Work Plan must be effected in practice by real flesh-and-blood beings, and better can always be done.

Over the last sixteen years, the ULP government has done the following, among other things, to build the anti-crime fighting apparatus of the State: Reforming and expanding the Police Force; enhancing the Coast Guard facilities and vessels; attracting quality applicants to the Police Force; increasing the salaries and allowances for police officers; enlarging vastly the training opportunities for police officers; improving markedly the working conditions of the police through the construction and renovation of police stations across St. Vincent and the Grenadines; better equipping the Police Force in several areas including telecommunications, videography and recording equipment, criminal investigation, and vehicles; setting up the Forensic Laboratory; strengthening the legislative framework against crime, including tough laws on illegal guns;

Police Youth Clubs and Community Policing have been established and we have strengthening the links between St. Vincent and the Grenadines and regional and international agencies in the fight against crime.

More Discipline

All of these efforts continue apace and new initiatives, particularly in intelligence gathering and analysis and crime detection, are being rolled out. Undoubtedly, the overwhelming majority of police officers are focused, courageous, and diligent in fighting crime.

Unfortunately, a minority of them are uninterested in policing and are possessed of a sedentary public service mind-set, trotting out lame excuses for their failure and/or refusal to do their duty with any sense of urgency or at all; often, these very ones are the perpetual complainers of this, that, and the other. The policy-makers and leadership of the Police Force, and the bulk of the disciplined police personnel have to address satisfactorily this challenge of a minority of none-performing police officers. It is a matter on which the public rightly complains.

In 2017, the Police Force intends, according to its targeted Strategic Outcomes, to ramp up the percentage of arrests of persons reasonably suspected of committing crimes, especially violent crimes, and providing the basis for the prosecution of those against whom there is a reasonable prospect of conviction. The public expects that when accused persons are taken to the Law Courts that the presiding judicial officers be firm and fair. The public interest demands that justice be done in accordance with law and without unreasonable delay.

Mr. Speaker, our government has embraced the formal request of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce to afford duty-free concessions to businesses which plan to install security cameras. I have asked that the Chamber work in concert with the Ministry of Information Technology and the Police Force to coordinate this matter. I am interested in providing the tax concessions to the very best security camera systems.

As a mature people we must acknowledge that some persons, mainly a small minority of young men, are bent on a life of crime. Their impulses and pre-dispositions towards criminality, and corresponding criminal activism, are many and varied. Excuses must not, and cannot, be made for such persons particularly those who have no regard whatsoever for human life. We must focus on being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. In this mix, of especial concern, too, is the violent offender who is mentally twisted or deranged. In this regard, the Mental Health Services must work very closely with the Police, the Prosecutors, the Law Courts, and the Prisons. Often this is not done well enough or at all; the consequences of any neglect in this regard can be deadly.