



Budget Contribution

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MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

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Introduction

Mr. Speaker,

All that we do at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must be for the benefit of Bahamians.

The fiscal year 2018/2019 was busy and productive for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in its dispatch of the country's foreign interests. As we move toward the end of the current fiscal year, the pace has not decreased.

I am very grateful to have a team that stand with me in carrying out the work of the Ministry. At this time, I wish to publicly thank Permanent Secretary Jack Thompson, Director General Brennen Haylock, all Ambassadors and High Commissioners, Consuls General, Senior Managers, Honorary Consuls, Foreign Service Officers and administrative staff for the support given to me and for their service to the Government and people of The Bahamas.

This is the third budget debate in which I have participated. In Biblical terms, the number three holds great significance. The meaning of this number derives from the fact that it is the first of four spiritually perfect numerals (the others being 7, 10 and 12). The number three represents the Holy Trinity – the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The three righteous patriarchs before the flood were Abel, Enoch and Noah. After the deluge there was the righteous "fathers" Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (later renamed Israel). In other words, three represents success, victory and triumph. It is my firm belief that God is telling us that our best days are yet ahead of us!

The Role of Ministry of Foreign Affairs

There is much misconception by the public as it relates to the work of my Ministry. The continuous refrain is that we are always travelling and attending cocktail receptions and parties. This criticism is no different from that levied on any other Foreign Service globally. However, there are several points I wish to make here to dispel this notion.

Firstly, I believe with utmost conviction that everything we do in the international arena must bring benefit to the people of The Bahamas. This has been my mantra from the day I took office as the Foreign Minister,

and this is a mantra that has been stated repeatedly to every Foreign Service Officer, whether serving abroad or at home – their *raison d'être* as a Foreign Service Officer is to use the foreign service as a mechanism to help achieve the national development plans and goals for our Bahamaland. The work that we commence might be completed by another Ministry or agency of Government and oftentimes we may not get the credit for having started the process, but we endeavour to ensure that what we are doing is of benefit to Bahamians. An example of this is illustrated in the message repeatedly stated by Foreign Service officers of The Bahamas and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) on the incorrect use of Gross National Product (GNP) per capita as a matrix to measure economic wealth and the negative impact that it has on small economies. The developed world has heard us and now the European Union (UN) and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are looking more closely into this.

Secondly, much of what is done by Foreign Service Officers pave the way for the work of substantive Ministries and Agencies of Government. The endless policy meetings in which Foreign Service officers sit at the UN, the Office of American States (OAS), CARICOM, the Commonwealth and other international organizations do serve a purpose. They begin the process for the setting of guidelines, standards and norms towards effective and sustainable governance and the attainment of productive resources. Attendance at receptions and other social events build and foster beneficial networks and partnerships. The call of countries such as The Bahamas on international organizations (most notably the UN) to look at building resilience for natural disasters has been heard. To date, the international community is looking more closely at an approach relative to resilience against natural disasters. How this is implemented at the end of the day will be carried out by other Agencies of Government, but the process started with Foreign Service Officers who sat in various negotiations on disaster management and climate change.

Thirdly, when Bahamians are in distress or encounter problems of any type, they know immediately to go to the nearest Bahamian overseas office or to call the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Oftentimes, the expectation of what the Government ought to do to get them out of problematic situations is quite unrealistic. Nonetheless, we work with families and others to get individuals home as quickly as possible when they encounter problems. In cases where an overnight stay is necessary, we assist with modest accommodations, meals, clothing (where deemed necessary) or other assistance that may be required.

Fourthly, some Bahamians find themselves in situations that cause them to become incarcerated or detained abroad. In such cases, our consular officers overseas visit Bahamian nationals on a regular basis to ensure that the rules of international law are being applied while they are detained and that their human rights are respected; ensuring the provision of basic needs such as for food, water, exercise and medication (where applicable). Further, my Ministry has worked with various Governments to establish prison transfer agreements and assist in the transfer process of Bahamians (incarcerated abroad) to serve out their prison sentences in The Bahamas. In doing this, individuals are closer to family and friends despite the incarceration.

Lastly, the Ministry has come under criticism for not responding to certain information reported in social media. I must state that the Ministry has to first obtain facts before offering comments or correspondence for matters reported in social media. Moreover, the rights and privacy of named individuals and their families ought to be respected. Further, at times the Ministry is required to refrain from commenting on matters that are under investigation by Bahamian and international authorities so as to prevent jeopardizing the investigation or our diplomatic relations with a given country. Social media, when used responsibly, can have positive results. However, oftentimes information is fabricated, exaggerated or incorrect; that is the irresponsible use of social media which can cause mischief or irreparable damage. I urge the Bahamian people not to be quick to cast judgement or to believe everything they read in social media and others places. Please appreciate that we can trust but must verify everything when we speak as a government.

Moving forward

We are a transformational government. We have come at a time that will define the future of our country. We are at a strategic inflection point. In other words, we are at the 'fork in the road' and whether we take the left or the right turn will determine our success or failure. The face of the Public Service is changing. The changing of the guards is in full flight. We have new Permanent Secretaries and new members of Senior Management. New approaches and mechanisms are being devised to advance the interests of the people of The Bahamas. One may wish to categorise this occurrence as a generational shift or a paradigm shift. This condition is no different for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The budget presented for the Foreign Service seeks to build on the success of work undertaken during the 2018/2019 fiscal year and allow the Ministry to move with the changing times.

Mr. Speaker,

On Foreign Service Training (Hiring and Succession) and Tools (Technology, Supplies, Space)

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs highly regards training as an essential part of human resource, professional development and succession planning. As such, the Ministry aims to further develop a strong, competent cadre of professionals, whose skills and talents are honed through targeted training opportunities.

The Bahamas' diplomatic relations with foreign countries and its collaborative partnerships, both at the domestic and international levels, have created meaningful channels through which Foreign Service Officers obtain necessary training to enhance their knowledge and level of expertise; primarily in the diplomatic, consular and protocol arenas.

The Ministry while desirous of ongoing collaboration with traditional training partners, is seeking to expand its pool of training opportunities to cultivate a more diverse training experience. The Ministry is committed to ensuring that new and existing officers seize training opportunities that will assist them in progressing from protégé to expert practitioner with leadership skills required for career advancement.

The Ministry has commenced training exercises for new and existing officers in an effort to enhance the technical capacity while ensuring maximization of our human resources and sustained organizational growth. Moreover, training and subsequent posting of qualified Foreign Service Officers is a priority for the Ministry as mandated by this administration.

The Ministry will continue to equip officers with the requisite skills to execute The Bahamas' foreign policy, while ultimately delivering quality service to those in the international arena on behalf of the Bahamian people. Likewise, we will continue to hire (as deemed necessary) and train young qualified persons in creating a new cadre to handle the shifting priorities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the past year, six (6) persons were hired as Foreign Service Officers in the Ministry and are currently undergoing training to become adequately equipped to advance the foreign policy of The Bahamas.

To properly train and enhance the skillset of our young officers coupled with modernising our offices, approximately seventy thousand dollars (BSD\$70,000.00) has been requested in the proposed budget to

obtain modern communication tools. This represents no increase over last year's budget but is imperative in order for the Foreign Service to function on par with international offices while effectively supporting the other arms of the Government. Of note, the world is forever evolving together with continued advancement in technology. To this end, we will require more significant investment in the future to remain current in the international arena.

Likewise, it is imperative that a significant investment be made to strengthen 'the troops at the front lines' that are directly engaged in the country's international relations. We ought to be mindful that these individuals are assembled to protect the country while promoting our interests outside of our borders. There is a sacrifice to be made which is dictated by the very nature of what The Ministry of Foreign Affairs represents in the promotion and protection of The Bahamas.

I pause here to commend the Foreign Service Officers that organized the annual Model United Nations (MUN) session, a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Rotary Clubs of The Bahamas. This event has proven year after year to be an excellent mechanism to expose talented students to debate, research and exploration of international policy issues. This year's theme "Water for Life", was indeed a topical issue of vital importance. I continue to be amazed by the astuteness of our high school students as they interact during the Model United Nations session. I extend congratulations to the students of St. Augustine's College that captured the winning prize of MUN 2019; which is the opportunity to travel to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September of this year. We have made provision in the Budget for hotel, transportation and *per diem*, (as we do every year) for this event to ensure that bright, young, high school students continue to enjoy this opportunity. The Rotary Clubs cover the cost of airfare. Congratulations are also extended to the students of Queen's College and NGM Major High School that finished as second and third place finalists respectively.

Introducing our high school students to the work of the Ministry through annual events like the Model United Nations session is an excellent avenue toward succession planning for the Foreign Service.

Mr. Speaker,

On Protection of our borders, illegal fishing, illegal migration, trafficking in arms, drugs and persons and fighting crime

I say it all the time but it is worth repeating; 'No country with shared borders can effectively secure their borders unilaterally'. Those who persist in engaging in illegal activities within and around our territory have obliged us to step up activities to secure our borders. The Ministry, through its Legal Affairs Division, supports the work of the Ministry of National Security and plays a coordinating role with domestic and international partners on matters relating to Human Rights, Crime and Security, Migration and implementation of our International Obligations under Treaties and Agreements to which The Bahamas is a state party.

Technical Inter-ministerial Committees were launched in the current fiscal year and provision to attend ongoing committee meetings has been incorporated in this new budget. Our attendance at these meetings is deemed necessary so that we can continue the process leading to technical talks with the Dominican Republic, Haiti and the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI). These Committees are added to the already mature consultation mechanism we have in place to discuss migration with Cuba. We also commenced discussion on preparing a border to border Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Royal Bahamas Defence Force (RBDF) and the Cuban Border Control; a discussion that will continue during the new fiscal year. These Committees comprise a cross section of experts from Ministry of National Security (MNS), RBDF, Royal Bahamas Police Force (RBPF), Department of Immigration, Office of the Attorney General (OAG), Agriculture and Fisheries, Tourism, Youth, Sports and Culture and personnel from relevant Civil Society groups. I take this opportunity to commend the Government of Cuba for the tremendous support it gave to The Bahamas in helping to protect our borders from illegal fishing.

Since the 1980 tragic sinking of HMBS Flamingo, we have progressed to the point in our relations with Cuba whereby Dominican poachers raping our resources are no longer untouchable when they attempt to flee apprehension by running into Cuban waters.

As it relates to the Dominican Republic, we will work towards the finalization of a MOU on Illegal Fishing, Illicit Drug Trafficking, Illicit Trafficking in Firearms and Illegal Immigration. We will also work toward establishing additional legal cooperation agreements as proposed by the Dominican Republic.

As it relates to TCI, we will work to bring together expertise from both of our countries to collaborate on an effective border control regime for our mutual benefit. Further, we will endeavour to put in place a mechanism for frequent high level political dialogue and establish a working group to undertake technical talks to formulate a MOU. The MOU will incorporate elements such as:

- Support in finding a solution to the illegal migration problem;
- A comprehensive border management system between The Bahamas and TCI, relating to border control, inclusive of mutual assistance and cooperation, and other matters of mutual interest;
- Bringing together experience and expertise from the two jurisdictions; and
- Information and intelligence sharing, training, joint operations and the synergizing of operational strategies.

Haiti remains a challenge. Following the meeting in early 2018 between our Prime Minister and the President of Haiti, we immediately reached out to the Haitian authorities to get a follow-up mechanism in place. However, it has been difficult to work in a meaningful way on what the two Heads agreed, due to ongoing unrest and instability in Haiti. From 2018 until now, there have been multiple mass demonstrations, at least two overhauls of the Cabinet and changes in key personnel in Government Ministries. Despite these challenges, we continue to work with the Government of Haiti in a collaborative manner. Our inter-ministerial committee is prepared to address the items agreed upon by our Prime Minister and the President of Haiti once the situation stabilizes in Haiti. The committee will continue to work with the Haitian authorities for the purpose of putting in place cooperative measures relative to a comprehensive Maritime Agreement, tourism, trade, agriculture, culture and sports.

It is imperative that such new measures be put in place to encourage Haitian migrants to remain at home as much as possible in our attempt to mitigate tragic events such as the case in February of this year. Thirty one (31) souls perished while making a treacherous journey from Haiti by sea to The Bahamas. Fortunately, eighteen (18) persons survived the treacherous journey. However, it is believed that there were as many as eighty (80) persons on the sea vessel and we can only assume that those who were not found also lost their lives. The Bahamas and Haiti worked together assiduously to bring speedy resolution to the situation. Unfortunately, this very tragic event has not caused an abatement in the flow of illegal migration. Clearly, we have more work to do in this area. I take this opportunity to convey my immense pride in the law enforcement

officers, the local authorities under the leadership of the Administrator in Abaco and volunteers of the local community who went above and beyond the call of duty to help with rescue efforts.

We are concerned that the United Nations Security Council recently decided to scale down its operation in Haiti. Unfortunately, this does not bode well for The Bahamas and we can expect the flow of irregular migration to continue. However, we will continue to press for a solution at all levels, including putting in place penalties for Bahamians who assist with illegal migration, working with the Government of Haiti to put in place more aggressive national campaigns to discourage illegal migration and working with our neighbours and international organizations for an effective outcome.

With respect to the matter of trafficking in persons, the Ministry, by way of the Trafficking in Persons (TIPs) Committee, works closely with the Ministry of National Security, the Office of the Attorney-General (OAG) and other agencies of Government to coordinate international meetings and to strengthen regional co-operation. In similar manner, we work closely with international partners. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has ensured training in Trafficking matters for staff of the Consular Division and the Passport Office and plans to develop continual training for Diplomatic and Consular officers at home and abroad. We have seen a decline in trafficking in persons and to this end, my Ministry intend to continue its efforts of collaborating with relevant groups to heighten awareness in this area.

Mr. Speaker,

On Delimitation and Maritime Matters

As members are aware, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for the oversight and management of our maritime boundary negotiations. Within the Ministry, this task lies with our Maritime Division, which serves as the policy advisory unit on Law-of-the-Sea-related matters, as well as the Secretariat for the Maritime Boundary Delimitation Committee. The Delimitation Committee exists to negotiate on behalf of the Government of The Bahamas, satisfactory conclusions of maritime boundaries with the United States of America; the United Kingdom on behalf of The Turks and Caicos Islands; and the Republic of Haiti.

In April 2018, the Committee resumed boundary negotiations with the Government of United States of America (USG) in Washington, D.C. The April 2018 technical discussions were followed by the formal round

of negotiations held in The Bahamas from 11-13 June 2018. Detailed updates on this process have been previously provided to Cabinet. Cabinet has endorsed the work of the Delimitation Committee to proceed.

Negotiations thus far have engendered a noticeably improved spirit of collegiality and collaboration between our two countries. Additionally, as a direct outcome of these discussions, the US Government agreed to and followed through, on a promise to rescind a letter of protest previously submitted to the United Nations Commission on the Outer Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) against The Bahamas' submission to that body for an extended continental shelf claim.

This accomplishment speaks to the fruitful and collaborative manner in which The Bahamas and the United States have resumed discussions, as the United States of America has never withdrawn an objection that was lodged with the Commission. The fact that The Bahamas was able to achieve such a feat, speaks to the cohesive and coordinated manner in which all relevant Government Agencies worked together to achieve a common goal and the important role the Committee and Division play in developing The Bahamas' strategy as it pertains to maritime negotiations.

The Boundary Committee, even as it negotiates with the US, continues to keep the remaining two countries, Haiti and TCI, squarely within its purview and intend to initiate discussions with those countries. The ultimate success of these negotiations, however, hinges on the Ministry having ready access to sufficient financial and human resources which would allow the Committee to identify and utilise to our advantage, the necessary technology and human expertise.

To this end, two hundred and ninety thousand dollars (BSD\$290,000.00) has been requested in the proposed budget for Delimitation, towards the successful conclusion of these objectives. This would cover expenses related to travel, hosting of meetings, research and analysis, training, supplies and the retention of legal and technical experts brought on to assist with specific projects related to these processes. At this time, I wish to acknowledge Capt. Godfrey Rolle, Ms. Kimberley Lam, Ms. Natasha Turnquest, Dr. Carol-Ann Albury and The Bahamas National Geographic Information System (BNGIS) team, Mr Allan Evans, Professor Phillip Saunders QC, the Office of the Attorney General and all relevant Ministries and Agencies for their service to the Committee in the capacity of technical and legal consultants.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of maritime boundary delimitation which is essential to the full realisation of the resource potential of The Bahamas as a sovereign State and one of only five (5) recognised Archipelagic States in the world.

As it relates to the International Maritime Organisation (IOM), we have been successful in securing the country's re-election for membership in this organisation for the past two decades. Of note, we thank the Ministry of Transport for their collaborative effort in this regard. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not immediately responsible for the budget of this activity, there are some responsibilities that are its own; such as lobbying and negotiating efforts which will call for the appointment of a Maritime Attaché to our Mission in London.

On Resilience rather than Humanitarian Aid

With the monster weather events increasing in frequency and intensity, as a result of climate change and global warming, we know that we cannot have a business as usual approach. In my role as Minister of Foreign Affairs, I have used every opportunity to convey to the global community that resilience must become a way of life as natural disasters profoundly impact each aspect of our existence. Through effective collaboration and partnerships at local, regional and international levels, we are better positioned to prepare and recover from natural disasters.

I previously reported to this august House, that in January 2019, Romania invited Caribbean Foreign Ministers to the International Conference on Building Resilience to Natural Disasters. During that meeting, Romania established diplomatic relations with the Caribbean Community for this purpose. Romania currently holds the rotating presidency of the EU and reiterated its interest in supporting CARICOM via a cooperation program. In respect of this position, a Memorandum of Understanding which seeks to "*implement and execute specific technical and scientific cooperation programmes and projects which take account of the priorities of the integration process within the Caribbean Community and the vulnerable nature of the small economies*" of CARICOM, was signed. Caribbean Ministers noted that building resilience must inevitably incorporate financial resiliency which for us is severely impacted by the unfair and unwarranted pressure being brought to bear by the European Commission, on several member states of CARICOM, with regards to the financial sector. This is further exacerbated by the inability of many within our Community to access

loans at concessionary rates. Romania has committed to speak up in support of the Community and against the position of blacklisting taken by the Commission.

On 12 April, while in Miami at the invitation of the United States Government, Caribbean Foreign Ministers participated in the Ministerial Meeting for the USA-Caribbean Resilience Partnership. This Partnership was launched at the end of the meeting and took into account the need to strengthen relations between the US and the Caribbean. Likewise, this partnership involves the advancement of shared interests between the US and the Caribbean to achieve greater resilience to natural disasters. Further, the Partnership also involves initiatives such as Understanding Risk and Enabling Action, Building Resilient Communities and Improving Disaster Response. It will also address the need for collaboration and cooperation against climate change and on the building of resilience to various natural disasters which are becoming more frequent and intense.

Resilience must become a way of life for every Bahamian. It is nonsensical to build, experience a massive hurricane with significant loss and damage, receive humanitarian aid and then build again. This is indeed a futile cycle. It is through efforts such as these that we can build effective collaboration and partnership at the local, regional, and international levels to support resilient building initiatives, through the sharing of resources and best practices for knowledge exchange and capacity building.

This was the message that I brought to the two (2) Resilience Meetings in Bucharest, Romania and Miami, Florida respectively and a recent meeting convened by Germany on May 28-29, for countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The persistent clarion call we have made for a focus on resilience has been heard by our partners in the developed world. We are getting the message out, (slowly but surely) that we need to build more resilient societies, rather than remain in the vicious cycle of destruction and restoration when there is a major weather event.

Germany, who will preside over the European Union for the latter half of 2020, had pledged to the Caribbean region that it would elevate discussion on climate change and its impact on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) during its campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council. In keeping its promise, Germany has elevated the discussion on this theme and has established The Group of Friends on Climate and Security in New York together with Nauru and partners from around the world. These bodies serve as an important

informal mechanism to discuss a range of ideas to combat climate change. Moreover, in its pledge to combat climate change with the region, Germany is urgently calling for:

- International action and joint initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and its effects;
- Decrease deforestation;
- Adaption to the changes that will soon be felt by people around the world;
- Strategic alliances and global partnerships with a view to promoting suitable joint action; and
- A special focus to support climate adaptation in countries most vulnerable to its effects, including the Caribbean and the Central American region.

As was the case in Romania, Caribbean Ministers had the opportunity to discuss financial resiliency with the German Financial State Secretary. During this meeting, issues pertinent to correspondent banking/derisking, blacklisting, anti-money laundering and combatting terrorism were raised and thoroughly discussed. Most noteworthy, emphasis was placed on the adverse actions of developed countries in these areas and the resultant impact that is experienced by small countries; including those in the Caribbean. The label, harmful or non-cooperative jurisdiction is more acutely felt by a small, vulnerable country than a large country. Representative countries highlighted the huge efforts taken to change legislation and rules to comply with the restrictions imposed by the EU, the European Commission (EC) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). However, the goal posts continue to change. The possible adverse impact of derisking on Tourism, on which the majority of our countries continue to rely was made clear. Ministers also expressed their grave concern for the short notice given by the EU to respond to requests before being blacklisted and also the obscure manner in which requests are often made. Requests are often posted on a website as opposed to the transmittance of a formal communication.

We found a sympathetic ear in Germany. However, the reality is that these countries are focusing on their own national interests; including protection of their tax regimes. Fortunately, the last blacklisting imposed by the EC was overturned by the European Council, however, this does not mean there will not be another attempt to publish a list of so-called harmful or non-cooperative jurisdictions during 2019. The recent European Parliamentary elections has resulted in a shift towards nationalism, which will be seen in the composition of the new Parliament. We will have to remain actively engaged with our European partners at the EU and the OECD to show that we can work together in a way that respect both their national interests and our sovereign right to regulate our financial sector.

As previously stated, the use of GNP/GDP per capita as a measurement of wealth must discontinue. Myself and other Caribbean Ministers, have repeatedly stated to developed country partners, that the perception of being a wealthy country because of the use of per capita measurements is misleading. This misconstrued measurement prevents us from accessing aid or loans at concessional rates thereby leaving us to bear astronomical recovery costs on our own. This, of course, is also linked to the question of building resilience. Funds invested in resilience will help to stop the repetitive and constant cycle of destruction and rebuilding due to major hurricanes. It is impossible to have the economy grow in a meaningful way when the country has to deal with costs of this nature.

In this vein, a promising sign is the work underway in the context of the OECD, on “Making Development Cooperation Work for Small Island Developing States”. In this work, it is stated that *“We are all affected by what happens to small island developing states. The strength of their economies, people, and land brings shared prosperity for everyone. Small island developing states are the custodians of the oceans that connect the world. At the same time, the families that live on these islands hold the frontline against the impact of natural disasters. These threats are increasing as a result of the climate change for which we all bear responsibility. Small island developing states are placed at the centre of a vicious cycle of high vulnerability and low growth. In response, development co-operation for this group of countries requires a unique strategy that is tailored to building long-term resilience against external blows.”*

Mr. Speaker,

On Technical Cooperation and Assistance

Just before I move to the next point, I would like to publicly congratulate the Prime Minister and his administration on the funding measures taken toward disaster response. In that:

1. We entered into a Hurricane contingency loan with the IDB for natural disasters;
2. We introduced the dormant account legislation which allow the use of funds in extinguished dormant accounts to be used for disaster relief funding; and
3. We have continued with the CRIFT.

Not all technical assistance received by The Bahamas is necessarily channelled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, there is a small, yet significant portion that we manage. The Ministry facilitates

training and scholarship offers by way of technical cooperation and assistance programmes through our bilateral and multilateral relationships. We receive training and scholarship opportunities from international and regional organisations and from countries with whom we have diplomatic ties. The offerings are quite diverse and cover a range of issues; with emphasis placed on priority interests for capacity building. In the past, The Bahamas has received offerings in the areas of Environmental and Waste Management, Disaster Risk Reduction, Natural Resources and Renewable Energy, Agriculture, Naval Science, Radiation, Architecture and Surveyance, Law of the Sea and Marine Sustainability, Police and Defence Training, Aviation and Civil Engineering. Scholarships are often in the form of courses, seminars and workshops; professional exchanges; fellowships; and national development projects with the provision of consultants, materials and/or equipment. The offers are for both the Public Service and the general public.

We have generally circulated the offers within the Public Service and to the general public via our website, social media pages and to the Family Islands via the Administrators. In the future, mass media and social media will be used to disseminate scholarship information to the widest audience possible. The Ministry acts as a facilitator for applicants for short-term courses and scholarships. Applicants are usually required to apply online directly to the offering entity or country. At no time, does the Ministry ever ask for a fee to process these offers. Fees (if any), are paid directly to the offering entity or country.

The Ministry seeks to ensure that not only do we accept offers from countries and organizations, but we have also met with other Ministries to ensure that we search for offers that are in alignment with national training priorities with the resultant course offerings being closely tied to the national development plans and goals of The Bahamas. In collaboration with the Government of France, we hope to have Alliance Française return to The Bahamas during the course of the fiscal year. In the past year, the Ministry was offered (for the first time) a scholarship for diplomatic training from Romania.

On Consular Services

The Ministry's Consular Division is in the front line of assisting Bahamian Nationals in distress, assisting foreign nationals in distress, managing deportations in conjunction with the Department of Immigration, authenticating documents and the issuance of visas. During the period July 2018 – April 2019, there were one hundred and forty eight (148) Bahamian nationals deported home, six thousand, seven hundred and sixty six (6,766) documents that were apostilled or legalized and three thousand, three hundred and twenty nine (3,329) visas were issued. Approximately seven hundred and ninety three thousand, six hundred and

eighty dollars (BSD\$793,680.00) in revenue was collected during the period July – December 2018 and four hundred and fifty eight thousand and fifty dollars (BSD\$458,050.00) for the period January – March 2019.

In consultation with the Ministry of Tourism and Department of Immigration, we made the decision during 2018 to waive the visa requirement for Indian Nationals who hold Canadian, US, UK and Schengen visas, as well as Indian Nationals who are permanent residents of these countries. I am advised that this resulted in a marked increase in arrivals of Indian nationals; a category of persons with significant purchasing power and who tend to spend longer time in a country when they take vacations. The visa requirement was also waived for holders of diplomatic and official passports from both of our countries. The Ministry is now close to making recommendations on a number of other countries for whom visas ought to be waived because of the success of the Indian visa waiver. We are also reviewing the current fee schedule for visas and other consular services with the intent to bring fees in sync with global standards.

Further, the Ministry is preparing to launch an e-Visa system before the end of the year. The introduction of this system will contribute to efficient consular services, increase the ease of doing business and mitigate fraud.

On the Passport Office

The Passport Office has received negative publicity in recent times. The Passport Office has always been challenged with providing services in a building with inadequate space. The influx of renewal applications due to the tenth year anniversary of the first e-Passport coupled with new applicants and persons now renewing their manual passports have compounded the challenges faced. Despite the challenges, staff at the Passport Office remain committed in executing their tasks in an expeditious manner to meet public demand. Likewise, there are ongoing improvements to the e-Passport system in an effort to remain current with standardised biometric systems globally while enhancing the service provided to the public. The Canadian Bank Note (CBN) Company Limited, a leading company in secure technology solutions was contracted to upgrade the country's existing e-Passport system. In October 2018, CBN conducted the user acceptance test at the Passport Office in conjunction with the Treasury to identify challenges that may exist or arise when using the system and to assess the online direct payment process. Concerns and issues observed during the testing were addressed by CBN. Subsequently, the User Acceptance Test (UAT) was deemed successful and all relevant agencies have signed off on the certificate.

Of note, testing of the electronic application process for the renewal of adult e-Passports commenced on 13 May, 2019. The testing is being done in a closed environment and involves a limited amount of test subjects from neighbouring government agencies. The functionality of the platform has proven to be working well, despite few anomalies which will be resolved. With certainty that the platform is functioning at full capacity, the Passport Office will 'go live' with the platform and Bahamians will be allowed to complete renewal applications online. It is anticipated that the public's utilization of the electronic application for e-Passport renewal would alleviate some of the overcrowding currently occurring at the Passport Office.

The timely collection of completed passports remains a problem at the Office. As of 22 May, 2019 there were a total of one thousand, two hundred and seventy seven (1,277) Passports that were not collected by applicants. Nonetheless, staff at the Passport Office continue to process applications and produce documents in a timely manner. Most noteworthy, plans are underway to install e-Pics systems (kiosks) at strategic locations in New Providence and Grand Bahama. The installation of these systems will allow persons to complete and submit electronic applications for passport renewals without having to visit the Passport Office. It is anticipated that utilization of the kiosks will significantly decrease the current overcrowding at the Passport Office.

Likewise, plans remain firm to install an e-Pics system in four (4) family islands, namely, Exuma, Central Eleuthera, Inagua and Long Island. The installation of this system will allow persons in these (and neighbouring) islands to submit applications for new passports and passport renewals without having to travel to the capital. Each of these islands will have assigned agents from the Passport Office to receive applications and perform interviews for new applicants. The approval of applications and production of passports will be completed at the Passport Office in New Providence. All passports will be forwarded to agents via courier service for issuance to applicants.

As of 1 July 2018 – 24 May 2019, Passport revenue stands at one million, four hundred and eighty two thousand, three hundred and fifty dollars (BSD\$1,482,350.00). From January 2019 - 24 May 2019, total revenue collected thus far is eight hundred and twenty four thousand, six hundred and fifty dollars (BSD\$824,650.00).

On Hemispheric Affairs

At the hemispheric level, we continue to be faced with challenges posed to the maintenance of peace, security and stability. The manner whereby, we as a nation and participatory member state in hemispheric bodies such as the OAS and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) confront and substantively address these challenges remain crucial. On 26 – 29 June, I will be leading a delegation to the 49th OAS General Assembly in Medellin, Colombia. This will be followed by the First Colombia-CARICOM Ministerial Summit to be held on 29 June 2019, in Cartagena, Colombia. It is anticipated that the unresolved political situation in Venezuela will dominate the discussion at the Assembly. It will be incumbent upon The Bahamas to remain resolute and stand firm on its previous positions on this matter. As for Venezuela, the most recent update is that under the auspices of Norway, both sides have been meeting, Maduro and Guaido. According to reputable sources, the talks have been amicable and there have been no recent actions or resolutions at the OAS or elsewhere.

With respect to CELAC, the Community has a new Pro Tempore Presidency for 2019 and Bolivia has resumed its work following a dormant period due to internal political and ideological challenges. The first meeting of the National Coordinators to set and discuss the Community's Work Plan for 2019/2020 was held on 24 April 2019, in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. The Bahamas was represented at this meeting. The principle meetings of which focus attention should be given and of which The Bahamas should be represented, are those of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of CELAC and CELAC-EU Foreign Ministers; as well as the Summit of Heads of State and Government proposed for early 2020, in Bolivia.

The Bahamas' physical presence in any country of the Hemisphere remains negligible. There is a need for more engagement, integration and wider outreach. The appointment of H.E. Mr. C.A. Smith as Non-Resident Ambassador for The Bahamas to the five countries of Central America (namely, Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama and Nicaragua) is a positive step in that direction. Serious consideration however, should be given to the establishment of a physical presence in one of the countries in the hemisphere that plays a significant role in the work of international and hemispheric bodies such as the UN and OAS. Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico are countries that ought to be considered for the establishment of an Office. Of note, several of our CARICOM Sister States have longstanding physical presence in these countries and are reaping the benefits in a number of areas such as technical and infrastructural assistance.

Mr. Speaker,

On the establishment of the Diaspora Database and Skills bank

The Ministry has made significant inroads towards the establishment of our Diaspora Engagement Programme. In the past year you would have heard both the Prime Minister and myself speak about our vision to engage Bahamians living abroad in the national development goals of The Bahamas. We have repeatedly pledged our commitment to utilizing the gifts and resourcefulness of the Bahamian Diaspora around the world. To date, we have conferred with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and several countries in the region to employ best practices in the development of our Diaspora Programme.

Championed by our colleagues in The Bahamas Mission to the United States in conjunction with the office of the Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry's headquarters (MFA HQ), the launch of this significant tool for development in our country is scheduled for later this year. Like other countries that have successfully done so, we will cultivate and utilize the expertise of the Bahamian Diaspora. We are currently creating a database of Bahamians overseas which the country can tap into for potential investors and consultants. For example, if there is not a local Bahamian consultant available in a given area, the priority will be to locate a Bahamian overseas, instead of first using a non-Bahamian consultant. The Diaspora Programme features an overseas council of the Bahamian Diaspora which will liaise with the Ministry's headquarters and utilize social media and a dedicated website that will help to produce a database and platform for communication with Bahamians overseas.

The overseas council may also promote investment and job opportunities for Bahamians wishing to return to and/or work in The Bahamas. The council will also promote ways that Bahamians overseas can network and assist with educational and diverse community-minded projects that will benefit The Bahamas; more specifically young Bahamians. We intend to create a global network of Bahamians to help boost national development for a 21st Century Bahamas. Likewise, we will continue to promote investment opportunities for Bahamians living and working outside of the Bahamas.

On the establishment of the Office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister

The Office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister (OSPM) is a non-partisan office that was officially launched on 21 March, 2018. The establishment of the office was based upon a CARICOM decision in fulfilling the mandate for support of women and advancement of specific initiatives (including the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals) of various regional and international organizations.

To date, the office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister has partnered with several organizations in advancing this mandate. In parallel with these partnerships, the office has launched several of its own initiatives to address national issues of importance; including issues relative to health, wellness, education and the empowerment of women and adolescent girls. The Office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister is an advocate for promoting education and awareness as it relates to these areas thereby fulfilling the objectives of the Spouses of Caribbean Leaders Action Network (SCLAN) and the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As an executive member of SCLAN, Mrs. Minnis is committed to working with the First Ladies and Spouses of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community to champion the CariWaC initiative. CariWac is the Caribbean's response to the United Nations (UN) Every Women Every Child global initiative (2010). The initiative has received support from CARICOM, United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies. SCLAN has also forged a strong partnership with Gilead Sciences Incorporated to advance this initiative.

In parallel with this collaboration, the Office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister endeavour to place priority on national issues that are negatively impacting the health and wellbeing of Bahamians. These national issues include an increased incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, hypertension, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

During the past year, the office has made a significant contribution to the Bahamian people through several of its ongoing projects. On 23 July, 2018, Mrs. Minnis led a team of mentors and girls to the Ambassadors for Change Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. The conference was hosted by Ambassadors for Change Incorporated which is an international organization that promotes change through education and empowerment. The work and relevance of the Office has also been realized through its participation in the

Clothesline Project; a gender based violence programme that calls attention to violence against women. The office continues to promote gender based violence awareness through its school visitation project.

On 9 October 2018, the office commenced a school visitation programme that enables Mrs. Minnis to deliver motivational speeches to junior and high school adolescent girls in an effort to decrease teenage pregnancy, promote awareness against gender based violence while promoting tertiary education and professional development. The launch of this programme was done in commemoration of the UN International Day of the Girl Child. To date, Mrs. Minnis has delivered motivational speeches to schools in Long Island (NGM Major High School and North Long Island High School), Abaco (Central Abaco Primary School, Patrick J. Bethel High School, Sherlin Bootle High School and Forest Heights Academy), New Providence (C.R. Walker High School and Government High School), Eleuthera (Preston Albury High School and Emma Cooper Primary School) and Andros (Central Andros High School). Most noteworthy, adolescent girls are being encouraged to delay pregnancy, remain in school and become productive citizens of society. It is anticipated that these empowering and motivational speeches be delivered to young girls in all schools in The Bahamas. Further, the office has partnered with leaders and mentors of Girl Clubs and Women Entrepreneur Groups in The Bahamas to create facilitations for women and adolescent girls to empower themselves. In October 2018, the office hosted a Women's Conclave to address the challenges faced by Girl Clubs and to develop a strategic plan to further facilitate the empowerment of women and girls in the country. The ladies in attendance saw the need to formulate a coalition to address the challenges and advance this work. These ladies are seeking to work in conjunction with the International Development Bank (IDB) in preparing the legal framework for the coalition. In March of this year, Mrs. Minnis attended the 63rd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW63-2019) along with several women from the Department of Gender and Family Affairs. Participation in this meeting allowed the office to liaise with several Women Empowerment Groups in the US including the Congressional Black Caucus and the Harlem Community Development Corporation.

More recently, the office established a gardening programme at Gambier Primary School to educate students about healthy eating habits while encouraging backyard farming. To date, teachers and students have reaped their first crop of produce that included broccoli, tomatoes, onions, beets and lettuce. In addition to this programme, students of Gambier Primary School will also be participating in a Science, Technology,

Engineering and Math (STEM) programme in conjunction with the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF).

Mr. Speaker,

On International Relations and Affairs

Establishment of Diplomatic Relations – We are not alone in our national endeavours. We, in The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, work in a coordinated fashion with all the other Ministries and Agencies of The Bahamas and with international partners. At critical junctures in the foreign relations of The Bahamas, the Government of The Bahamas had to make important decisions for the benefit of the country and our people. The Ministry, in its coordinating function and advisory position on foreign affairs, has entered into diplomatic relations that may have been questioned at one point or another but have proved to be the right decisions at the right time (e.g., Cuba, China). Observing developments around the globe and their impacts on our Archipelago lead to the need to consider establishing strategic partnerships through the establishment of new diplomatic ties. The Ministry will be proposing a list of countries which The Bahamas should consider for official bilateral relations. Although there are no immediate budgetary implications, funds would have to be available for administrative arrangements; namely, office supplies, printing of official documentation and honoraria for Honorary Consuls to represent the interest of The Bahamas in these new locales.

In an effort to further strengthen our diplomatic ties, The Bahamas appointed Excellencies Reuben Rahming, Basil W. Barnett and Cornelius A. Smith as Non Resident Ambassadors to CARICOM, The Holy See and Central America respectively. In similar fashion, The Bahamas accepted Letters of Credence or Introduction from several countries over the past year. These countries included Russia, Portugal, Chile, Zambia, France, Germany and South Africa.

To date, there is ongoing communication between Ministry officials and the British Government pertinent to the re-opening of a British High Commission in The Bahamas. Further, the Ministry continues to have discussions with US officials in relation to the appointment of a new US Ambassador to The Bahamas.

Establishment of the Diplomatic Mission in Brussels – As a small country, we understand the need to prioritise the manner of our expenditure. With further understanding of our need to be strategic, The

Bahamas has established Missions overseas in a very limited way. The Bahamas has strategically placed its Missions with a resultant physical presence in key regions; namely, Beijing, Havana, London, Ottawa, Port-au-Prince, Washington-DC, and now, for the first time in some thirteen (13) years (since Havana in 2006), we have opened an Embassy in Brussels. Of note, a very methodical approach was taken to establish our office in Brussels and subsequent presence in the seat of the EU. We realised that it was no longer feasible to address (or defend ourselves from) certain matters of critical importance to us as a nation from the Capital; more specifically blacklisting (by OECD and the EU) and trade negotiations. To this end, the Brussels office was established to promote and protect the economic interest of The Bahamas relative to trade, investment and financial services. The office is currently headed by a veteran banking expert in the form of H.E. Ms. Maria O'Brien. Ambassador O'Brien presented her Letters of Credence to the King of Belgium on 13 March, 2019 and I am hopeful that she and her team will represent us well. During my contribution to the 2018-2019 Budget, it was agreed that steps would be taken to establish our presence in the seat of the European Union. While it is still too early to discuss the return on this investment, which includes the budget for the Mission, residence, accommodations, maintenance, vehicles, supplies, staffing travel, and official functions, it is anticipated that the people of The Bahamas will be kept well informed.

Human Rights Council – In the same way with the decision-making in respect to the establishment of diplomatic relations, The Bahamas took on the decision to become more involved in a wider range of international bodies that delve into sensitive issues and more specifically those dealing with human rights. Human Rights expert Marion Bethel was supported and was successful in her bid for membership of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2017-2020) and The Bahamas was successful the second time around in its bid for membership of the Human Rights Council (2019-2021). The Bahamas has done well in facing the challenges as new members, through the recognised expertise and effort of our representatives and our reputation as honest and neutral brokers in the area of human rights. The commensurate budget for our three-year membership (2019-2021) on the Council, which meets in Geneva, is included in this budget. On the Council we have continued to support the full and equal enjoyment of human rights for all, especially the rights of women, youth and children. The Council has also proven to be yet another excellent forum to articulate the nexus of the impact of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights, as well as unfair practices in the global economy and to recommend changes thereto.

Council of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) – The Ministry was pleased to provide critical support to the Utilities Regulation and Competition Authority (URCA) that led to The Bahamas' election as one of forty eight (48) countries to the ITU Council in November 2018. This is the first time The Bahamas will serve on this body as one of nine (9) members of Region A of the Council. We are the only member of CARICOM to hold the position in twelve (12) years. It is a significant undertaking for our country and a critical opportunity for representation of the Caribbean region and SIDS around the world. The Bahamas will focus particularly on issues of importance to SIDS, such as ICTs role in addressing Climate Change, Disaster Preparedness and Management and ICT development in rural and remote areas.

US - The US remains an important ally in the fight to protect our borders and prevent illegal activities of all types. The US Coast Guard, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force (RBDF) and the Department of Immigration continue to collaborate, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs being kept in the loop on all aspects of cooperation, including the monitoring and processing of migrants interdicted in Bahamian waters. Of note, we work closely with the Department of Immigration for the eventual repatriation of those who have entered our jurisdiction illegally.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in conjunction with the Ministry of Tourism facilitated the resumption of negotiations with the US for a bilateral Aeronautical and Maritime Search, Air, and Rescue draft (SAR) Agreement on 13-14 June, 2018. The goal is to formalize the Agreement in an effort to strengthen relations and cooperation between both countries with a view to developing text for a new SAR Agreement. These discussions will resume during the new fiscal year.

The Governments of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas and the United States of America also resumed negotiations regarding the management of The Bahamas Flight Information Region (FIR) on the 15-16 May 2018. The purpose of the bilateral talks was to formalize the current arrangement with an Agreement that would detail the conditions under which the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) would continue to manage that portion of the sovereign airspace of The Bahamas presently under its control which would secure additional revenue for the country. We expect these discussions to resume in the future.

On 8 August 2018, The Bahamas signed the Eighth (8th) Amendment to the Letter of Agreement on Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement and simultaneously received USD\$1.4 million dollars from the United States

of America to support Anti-Corruption Efforts. The signing of this agreement is a testament to the strong partnership between The Bahamas and the US in tackling corruption.

On 14 May, 2019, The Bahamas Government signed a MOU with the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs for the re-establishment of the Fulbright Scholarship Programme for academically qualified Bahamians. The re-establishment of the programme follows a twenty three (23) year hiatus. I am sure that my colleague, the Minister of Education will speak further to this prestigious agreement.

One of the major highlights of the past year was our multilateral meeting with President Donald Trump. I was delighted to be a part of the Prime Minister's delegation with Caribbean leaders from the Dominican Republic, the Republic of Haiti, Jamaica and St. Lucia. The occasion provided for a multilateral meeting with US President Trump at Mara-Lago in West Palm Beach, Florida and a bilateral meeting with John Bolton, National Security Advisor of the United States.

At this time, I wish to express our gratitude to the US for the handover of the country's first state-of-the-art coastal radar system. This new capability will enhance our national security and can be utilized by all uniformed branches to combat crime, illegal migration and other national security threats. It is anticipated that more of these long range coastal radars will be strategically placed throughout The Bahamas.

China - The People's Republic of China continues to be one of our partners, both nationally and in the international arena. The Ambassador and his team are in regular contact with the Ministry.

During 5-10 November 2018, I led a delegation participating in the First China International Import Expo (CIIE) in Shanghai. At the same time, the Minister of Tourism and Aviation, the Honourable Dionisio D'Aguilar, high-level tourism officials and private sector partners were in Shanghai to promote tourism and investment in The Bahamas during a two-day Trade Mission. Likewise, industry partners, namely Atlantis, Baha Mar and The Pointe also attended the event. During this visit, I was afforded the opportunity to attend high-level bilateral meetings with Government Officials, including the Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, His Excellency QIN Gang, and Provincial Government Officials which included the Vice-Mayor of Beijing, His Excellency XU Kunlin, and the Vice-Mayor of Shanghai, His Excellency YIN Yong. Meetings

were also held with Chinese industry leaders and partners to discuss further possibilities for joint investment co-operation developments in The Bahamas.

On 21 February of this year, The Bahamas participated in the 7th Round of Consultations between China and nine (9) Caribbean countries with whom it has diplomatic relations. The meeting was held in Beijing. There were comprehensive discussions on the range of technical cooperation and assistance between China and those countries. The items discussed included education, technical and vocational training, language training, health and infrastructure building. Both sides agreed to continue the deepening of cooperation in these areas and to expand in other areas such as air services agreement, legal assistance and combatting corruption. China explicitly expressed interest in having agreements with the Caribbean on the transfer of prisoners and mutual legal assistance.

The consultations also provided the occasion for the Caribbean countries to convey their firm reaffirmation of the One China Policy. The 8th round of consultations will take place in the Republic of Dominica in 2021, and The Bahamas will participate as usual.

I take this time to thank Ambassador Quant (our representative accredited to China) for affording me and the Minister of Tourism the opportunity to meet with members of the Bahamian Diaspora during my visit to Shanghai. A number of these individuals are Bahamians studying in the vicinity of Shanghai who are beneficiaries of the China Scholarship Programme while others are individuals residing in Shanghai as employees applying their talents to develop Sino-Bahamian business ties.

Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1997, more than three hundred (300) Bahamians have benefitted from technical assistance offered in the form of short courses aimed at developing professional skills and in undergraduate, graduate and post graduate degree programmes at universities in China. These opportunities have allowed Bahamians to advance their technical skills and simultaneously gain first-hand knowledge of China, its history, its culture and its people. For this we continue to express our appreciation to the People's Republic of China. Another twenty five (25) scholarships at the Masters level have been offered by the Ministry of Commerce of China for 2019; the application process is open until 17 June 2019. Information about these scholarships can be found on the Ministry's website. The scholarship information

was also forwarded to media houses, all government Ministries and all Family Island Administrators for dissemination to the general public.

I know that I had reported previously that an Air Services Agreement was soon to be signed with China. However, the Chinese side proposed a few changes which The Bahamas side has accommodated and we expect to sign the agreement during the next Assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) in September of this year.

India - We continue to enjoy excellent relations with India whose High Commissioner is based in Jamaica. Since 2018, we joined India in celebrating two Republic Days in The Bahamas. Republic Day commemorates that historical moment when the Constitution of the Republic of India came into effect. The two years of observance has afforded the Indian and Bahamian communities to come together in a meaningful way. Technical cooperation with India is increasing. Most recently, some one hundred thousand dollars (BSD\$100,000) was granted to assist with road infrastructure. In the past two years, fully funded diplomatic training has been offered by India from which three Foreign Service Officers benefitted and another offer has recently been made for 2019.

India has also indicated that it will offer a series of capacity building opportunities for SIDS of the Commonwealth, through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC). The purpose of the capacity building programme is for junior to mid-level professionals from Commonwealth Member States to enhance their knowledge on the use of modern technologies geared towards better management of ocean based national resources and wealth. These courses are to be conducted by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) through the National Institute of Oceanography of India. I previously stated the decisions taken with respect to waiver of visas for certain categories of Indian nationals.

Japan - Relations with Japan are important and strong. In October 2018, Japan donated equipment and products worth an estimated BSD\$1.8 million to The Bahamas through the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). The equipment will be used to respond to the adverse effects of climate change and especially boost the country's ability to deal with natural disasters. Japan has also pledged to assist with training and other necessary services for operation, maintenance of equipment or consultant services. Two Foreign Service Officers have received training since I last reported to you. Due to The Bahamas' "so called"

wealth because of its per capita GNP, Japan had offered limited technical assistance to The Bahamas. This has been rectified during 2017 and 2018. We are most appreciative that Japan has taken into account vulnerability and decided to reverse its decision with respect to increasing technical assistance offerings to The Bahamas.

Other International Activities of Note – In addition to following up on all that we did during the last fiscal year, reflected in this new budget are a number of strategic and important meetings that take place annually. These include:

1. The UN General Assembly, during which there will be a high-level review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS). Our Ambassador in New York, H.E. Ms. Sheila Carey, along with Ambassador Olof Skoog of Sweden, is leading the charge to prepare the global community for this review;
2. A number of other UN meetings;
3. Meetings related to Oceans and Law of the Sea;
4. Meetings of CARICOM and the ACS;
5. Meetings of the OAS;
6. Meetings of CELAC; and
7. Meetings of the Commonwealth.

Our overseas offices continued to do commendable work in 2018 and consequently, The Bahamas maintained strong multilateral representation in the global space.

- Geneva/UN: 2018 has been a defining year for The Bahamas under the rubric of the promotion and protection of human rights. Beginning in January of this year, The Bahamas undertook its Third Universal Periodic Review by the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The Bahamas received one hundred and four (104) recommendations from Member States and accepted over eighty (80) of these in full or in part. We are indeed grateful to all States for the constructive recommendations made to The Bahamas on this occasion and reaffirm the importance attached to the implementation of all commitments undertaken. The Bahamas was also successfully elected to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and received the highest number of votes in its regional group. The country will serve as a Council Member for the period 2019-2021 and has become the first State of the CARICOM so elected since the body's establishment in 2006. In this context, The Bahamas has pledged to

bringing diversity and inclusiveness to the global human rights discourse, with a view to advancing its interests and those of other Small Island Developing States. We see this achievement not as the *end* of a process but rather as the beginning of an enhanced engagement by The Bahamas in the field of human rights at the international level, while ensuring continued impact on the ground. It is also a continuation and reaffirmation of our unwavering commitment to guaranteeing the fundamental rights and freedoms of all, non-discrimination, protection of the rights of children, the disabled and realizing the rights to health, education and development *inter alia*.

- Our Geneva Office is also working assiduously to facilitate our goal of WTO accession in 2019; we are pleased with the progress made to this end, including the recent convening of our Third Working Party Meeting, marking a reactivation of the negotiation process after a six (6) year hiatus. I reiterate the commitment of The Bahamas Government to conclude WTO accession negotiations in 2019. Further, this office is currently completing the process for revising the Short-Stay Visa Waiver Agreement between the Commonwealth of The Bahamas and the European Union. The revised Agreement would allow Bahamians to be landed in EU countries without a visa and remain for up to ninety (90) days within a period of one hundred and eighty (180) days.
- In Washington DC, our Consular Annex has continued its efforts for Diaspora engagement with several school visits to Bahamians within its jurisdiction and participation in numerous national promotional events. The DC Consular Annex has also coordinated trade and political missions to Chicago, in connection with the Honorary Consul in Chicago.
- Our Atlanta Consulate also coordinated a high level trade mission to North Carolina and Atlanta and has facilitated agreement of a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) between the Government of The Bahamas and Georgia State University which provides matching scholarships to the Public School Scholar (PSS) Programme and in-state tuition for Bahamian students. The Atlanta Consulate continues to spearhead the Diaspora Engagement Programme in collaboration with the Consular Annex in Washington.

Mr. Speaker,

I am pleased with our success and accomplishments to date. Our journey continues and with the help of Almighty God we will complete our journey, finish the tasks at hand and fulfill our mission. North Abaco fully supports the 2019/2020 Budget Estimates.