



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Budget Contribution

2021-2022

**HON. DARREN A. HENFIELD, M.P.
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS**

7 June 2021

Mr. Speaker,

It is always my distinct privilege and honour to rise in these hallowed halls on behalf of the people of North Abaco whom I believe are the strongest, determined, most industrious and resilient people in the world.

I begin my contribution to this 2021/22 Budget by giving thanks to Almighty God who anchors, guides, directs and keeps me in all that I do. He alone continues to be the source of my strength and the only hope I have in the life to come.

I extend condolences to Gary and Donna Hudson of Treasure Cay, who lost their son a couple of weeks ago in a traffic accident; to Cousin Alice Morley and her family on the passing of Elenor Hield last week and to Craig and Percil Cephas of Grand Cay on the tragic death of their son on Friday past. I also extend condolences to Douglas Evans and his family on the recent passing of his parents Lloyd and Mispah Evans. And to the families of Reverend Addison A. Turnquest and Mrs. Stephanie Wells, who both recently passed. We assure the families of our prayers and support.

Mr. Speaker,

I'd also like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Right Honourable Dame Janet Bostwick on receiving the 2021 CARICOM Triennial Award for Women, which recognizes her contributions to society.

This most prestigious regional award—among other things—is given to Caribbean women who have distinguished themselves in the socio-economic development of the community and for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

I had the privilege of personally congratulating Dame Bostwick over the weekend and I know that my colleague the Minister of Social Services who campaigned to achieve this honour will speak more on it when he makes his contribution in this place.

Mr. Speaker,

On a personal note

My wife of 36-years—Deidre, whom we affectionately call Sirdae—remains my north star who leads to the sanctuary and safety of the home, which she has built for my children and I over all these years.

I honour my maternal grandmother Ann Louise Cornish and my mother, Evelyn Cornish Henfield—both of whom have gone on to their eternal rest. They believed in me, encouraged me, prayed for me and loved me unconditionally.

My father—Bishop Clifford Henfield—taught me discipline and the values associated with being the leader of one's family. Dahlya—my granddaughter—has caused me to love in a way that is novel to me.

I thank Prime Minister Minnis for the trust he's reposed in me to speak on behalf of our beloved nation—both at home and abroad.

It is not lost on me that mine is a most improbable journey. I guess that's why I don't have that sense of entitlement that many seem to struggle with.

You see - Mr. Speaker—I'm a little fella from Dundas Town, Abaco—more specifically—Block 30.

Went to Dundas Town, Primary School, graduated Abaco Central High School—worked until I was old enough and like so many other young Bahamians—I enlisted in the Royal Bahamas Defence Force in 1980 in the aftermath of the Flamingo incident.

Simply put, I—like most of my generation—am shaped by Independence and inspired by sacrifice and service.

Whilst serving—through the years—I attended Britannia Royal Naval College; the College of The Bahamas; the University of the West Indies and the Naval Post Graduate School.

Mr. Speaker,

God has been good to me. I get to stand on the shoulders consequential Bahamian pioneers and nationalists. Every time I walk into my office at the Ministry, I walk past the photographs of former Foreign Ministers, and each time I am awed. I mean, think about it, Sir Lynden Pindling, the Hon. Paul L. Adderley, Sir Clement Maynard, Dame Janet Bostwick and the venerable Member from St. Anne's. That's pretty high corpus for a lil fella from Block 30.

Mr. Speaker,

Why it is important for Leaders—well Doc—to traffic in hope

I heard it said in here last week that the budget was “too much trafficking in hope.” So, I looked-up a hope and this is what Google says: “Hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen.”

Here is what the Bible says about hope: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

This is what Martin Luther—the great reformer—says about hope: “Everything that is done in this world is done by hope”

Mr. Speaker,

My perspective

That brings me to where I think we all need to find ourselves from time to time, in that place of establishing perspective.

When we assumed office in May of 2017 we found—as indicated by the Prime Minister in his presentation in this place last Wednesday—and I quote:

“Imagine that, even though it is hard to imagine: They left almost a billion dollars in unfunded bills (3) and arrears that they kept mostly hidden from the Bahamian people.”

And then they tell the Bahamian people to ignore Hurricane Dorian—the worst of its kind in the history of Atlantic storms—which sat on Abaco and Grand Bahama for near three days and left in its wake death, destruction and too many disrupted lives.

But the Bahamian electorate is astute, capable and perceptive, that’s why the PLP were voted out in mass in 2017. Just one survived in New Providence.

Mr. Speaker,

Apart from the human suffering, the share destruction and trauma, Dorian left behind, the killer storm also left a price tag estimated at \$3.5 billion dollars.

So, how do we simply ask the Bahamian people to just ignore that six (6) months after Dorian, a Pandemic the likes of which the world had not seen in 100-years called COVID-19 also came to our shores.

As you quite well know—Mr. Speaker—there was no playbook designed to respond to Hurricane Dorian or the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Hind sight is always twenty/twenty.

Not only did the Pandemic bring our touristic dependent economy—which had seen in brightest day ever on our watch (more 7 million reported)—to an abrupt stop, but it also took the steam out of our recovery and restoration efforts in Abaco and Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker,

In its Press Release of 1 June 2020 entitled *IMF Executive Board Approves a US\$ 250 Million Disbursement to The Bahamas to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic*, the IMF stated the following:

“The Bahamas was just recovering from the widespread destruction caused by Hurricane Dorian in the fall of 2019, when the pandemic led to a sudden stop in tourism, generating sizable fiscal and external financing needs. The economic outlook remains subject to an unusually high degree of uncertainty.

“The authorities’ policy response to the COVID-19 crisis is appropriate, including the timely adoption of targeted fiscal measures to boost health spending, support jobs and vulnerable segments of the population. Once the present crisis subsides, significant and determined fiscal consolidation will be needed to achieve the targets specified under the Fiscal Responsibility Act.”

Mr. Speaker,

A United Nations Development Programme missive dated July 2020 and entitled: *UNDP LAC C19 PDS No. 16 The Bahamas Country Note: Impact of COVID-19 and policy options* (on page 8 of the document) reads as follows:

“The pandemic comes as the country is rebuilding from the devastation caused by Hurricane Dorian in September 2019. Nonetheless, The Bahamas is in a better position to develop an emergency response to the crisis and reduce its impact on poverty and unemployment than most of the countries in the region. The country has shown sustained growth over the last years and the government has improved fiscal compliance. However, poverty is still prominent, especially among scattered islands, and unemployment is around 10% and rising. In the face of a long-term recession, the Government needs to reevaluate the social spending strategy, shifting help from food assistance to a wider unemployment coverage that can reach those households most in need. The country should invest in improving social statistics and registration plus avoid the risk of duplicating efforts to deliver help to the population. In the long term, efforts should be made to diversify the economy and reduce the high dependency on tourism.”

Mr. Speaker,

In a more recent World Bank Press Release dated 25 May 2021 entitled *World Bank Approves US\$100 Million for The Bahamas’ COVID-19 Response and Recovery* we find the following:

“The COVID-19 pandemic came on the heels of the devastation caused by Hurricane Dorian,” said Tahseen Sayed, World Bank Country Director for the Caribbean. *“The Bahamas has suffered one of the most severe economic contractions in the Caribbean. This World Bank assistance will contribute to country efforts to reduce vulnerabilities of citizens most impacted by the crisis, and support policy and institutional measures for a resilient recovery.”*

Mr. Speaker,

Despite the challenges

“Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.” (Dale Carnegie)

I read somewhere that “it’s our reaction to adversity and not adversity itself that determines our outcome.”

During the past four years, I’ve had a bird’s eye view of the reactions of Killarney whom we admirably call Doc as he faced the type of challenges not seen by any political leader in recent history of our country.

You see it is impossible to contextualize the fiscal disposition of The Bahamas to date without serious consideration of three very catastrophic events: Hurricane Dorian; the Covid-19 Pandemic and the failed PLP, which preceded them.

That said—Mr. Speaker—despite the triple calamitous happenings which this Administration has been forced to contend—yet underpinned by a policy vision to make our nation a more consolidated archipelago which provides equality in services from Inagua to Walkers Cay—we have been able to get some things done:

- Evacuated the Southern Bahamas ahead of Irma;
- Reduced the deficit;
- Brought unemployment;
- Grew Tourism to historical numbers;
- Made historical strides in the fight on crime;
- Delivered free attendance to University of The Bahamas;
- Supported Family Island UWB \$500.00 living stipend;
- Refused to furlough Public Servants;
- Funded unemployment assistance to the tune \$118 million;
- Disbursed \$259 million in the War on COVID-19;
- Nearly \$39 million to feed our people;
- \$44.4 million in support of business;
- \$53.3 million to support entrepreneurs; and
- Digitized government services to provide more ready access to Bahamians all across this Beautiful archipelago.

In the result, we are still standing in the breach for those who can’t stand for themselves and we will not stop until the future of every Bahamian is secure. That is our prayerful hope.

Mr. Speaker,

The future of Abaco is extremely bright

Abaco will be bigger, better, stronger and more resilient because of Hurricane Dorian. Amidst what others saw as challenge and chaos, I've always seen tremendous opportunities.

And so, despite the naysayers—and admittedly the amount of work left to be done—Abaco is on the mend and poised to go to the next level!

Let me say that the Government's policy to allow the continuance of the Special Economic Recovery Zone Orders (SERZ) to ease the burden of the already burdened in Abaco and Grand Bahama is a clear indication that we recognize that the full recovery of the economy of The Bahamas cannot and will not be realized without the strength and vibrancy that Abaco brings to the table.

Mr. Speaker,

I am advised that the Federal Emergency Agency (FEMA) asserts that it takes fifteen (15) years for a yet developing country to recover from an event such as Hurricane Dorian.

Therefore, on the road to recovery, in tandem with the Government's objectives to achieve the Accelerated Bahamas Recovery Plan toward achieving the seven (7) core priorities of:

- Job creation;
- Small Business Development;
- Healthcare Improvement and Vaccinations;
- Tourism Development;
- Public Private Sector Investment;
- Digitization and Innovation; and
- Fiscal Responsibility.

We in Abaco are poised “not just poised to recover, but to thrive in a post-Dorian, post-pandemic Bahamas.”

We will do so through home construction, commerce, education, commercialization of our air and sea ports, food security initiatives, and innovation.

Mr. Speaker,

Home ownership

Every time I meet with young people—and in fact, some not so young people—anywhere in Abaco, their desire to own land and their own homes always come to the fore.

Early on, we identified three (3) potential sites in Abaco to develop the type of communities envisioned. These include Central Pines (more westerly toward Murphy Town’s Southside Road area); Spring City and Wilson City. Separately, from the mentioned identified sites for the development of service lot communities—through potential public, private, partnerships as envisioned by the Prime Minister—the DRA has already cleared the proposed site for the building of homes donated by the Bakers Bay group. It is anticipated that construction on five (5) model homes in that community will commence within the next two to three weeks.

I am also pleased to say that the Ministry of Housing—through the government’s service lot land initiative—is poised to replicate its Carmichael initiative in Central Pines. It is contemplated that by the end of the development, some sixty (60) homes will have been built. Phase 1 of the project, which anticipates the building of some twenty (20) homes will commence before the end of the summer.

Mr. Speaker,

Ongoing recovery and restoration efforts

As we appreciated right at the outset—the Government alone—despite its best efforts, cannot repair all of the damage visited upon us by Hurricane Dorian—especially in the midst of the War on COVID-19.

Permit me just to say here that this Minnis led Administration—through the operations of the Disaster Recovery Authority (DRA)—is committed to ensuring that every homeowner that has been assessed and approved by the mechanisms employed by that agency will receive the assistance promised by the DRA.

I know that my colleague Minister from West End and Bimini, who has responsibility for Disaster Reconstruction, will speak to this notion.

So, along with what we have been doing as a collective—with the aide and assistance of donors from at home and abroad—I will continue to help in our efforts to recover, fully.

Mr. Speaker,

Through a much welcome initiative dubbed “Operation Work Speed” (OWS)—which is intended to augment and not compete with existing governmental and private restoration efforts in Abaco, more help is underway.

In the first instance, the program will focus on those in need of labour and others in need of material.

Thus far, some ninety five (95) plus homes have been assessed as to their existing needs and it is anticipated that five (5) of these homes will be addressed in one way or the other within the next two-weeks.

Mr. Speaker,

Commercial development is key to the future of Abaco

Whilst Bakers Bay, Winding Bay and the Cays appear to be rebounding nicely, there are several major investment projects underway, at the gate or being finalized for Abaco.

From Hole-in-the Wall in the south to Walkers Cay in the north and almost everywhere in between, Abaco is set for a boom period—the likes of which it has not seen since Treasure Cay had its own currency.

- Tyrsoz Family Holdings Ltd.'s \$300 million resort and marina development in south Abaco near Hole-in-the-Wall, I'm advised that land clearing is scheduled to commence soonest;
- Sterling Montage Cay Ltd.'s \$352.2 million Marina property development investment on Matt Lowe's Cay in Central Abaco is scheduled to begin infrastructural works in a few weeks, I'm advised; and
- Treasure Cay Beach, Marina and Golf Resort, I'm advised is under contract for sale.

Mr. Speaker,

Air and sea ports

There is tremendous interests in our air and sea ports in Abaco. I'm certain that my colleague, the Minister with responsibility for airports, will speak to the Government's plans for Treasure Cay International Airport when he contributes to this debate.

Moreover, there have been several expressions of interests relative the private operations of the Marsh Harbour and Coopers Town Ports.

Mr. Speaker,

Food security and diversification of the economy

My brother, the Minister with responsibility for agriculture and fisheries is actively pursuing ways and means of moving our country toward food security. Abaco, has an active farming community and possesses some forty eight thousand (48,000) acres of arable farm land of which just seventeen thousand (17,000) acres are in use.

When I was a boy, we were heavily engaged in growing and exporting tomatoes, cucumbers and later citrus from Abaco.

Mr. Speaker,

Technical education

If there is one lesson we can take away from Hurricane Dorian it is the need for Bahamians to engage more deliberately in technical training toward rebuilding and ongoing development.

Mr. Speaker,

Capitol works and ancillary efforts

Post-Dorian capitol works in Abaco are progressing despite the economic climate in which we find ourselves. The seawalls to secure the shorelines of Dundas Town and Pelican Shores are very much near completion. The Little Abaco Bridge, valued at more than \$5 million is pretty much well underway but due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, much needed technical expertise to move the project toward its final stages has been delayed.

The Green Turtle Cay dump site, which has been a source of immeasurable consternation to me and the residents of that lovely little island is soon to be completed. Upon completion it will simply be a transfer station operation where waste is transported to the mainland for disposal.

It is our hope that all such sites from Grand Cay to Snake Cay are similarly converted in the not too distant future. The Ministry of Works has either completed or in the process of completing the necessary scopes of work to effect much needed repairs and refurbishment to all of our docks that were drastically impacted by Hurricane Dorian.

Mr. Speaker,

Road markings and safety

Far too many of our young people are dying on the highways of Abaco.

Very shortly we will embark upon a road safety campaign toward sensitizing road users to exercise more caution and care on the roads.

Mr. Speaker,

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

I now turn my attention to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Over the last four (4) years, it has been the mantra of the ministry to engage all and sundry with the view of enhancing the economy and security of The Bahamas. It is my view that we have done relatively well in this regard.

Mr. Speaker,

Permit me to thank my Permanent Secretary, Mr. Peter Deveaux-Isaacs, for his constant guidance and sage advice; Director General, Sharon Brennan-Haylock, for her attention to details; Ambassador-at-large, Dr. Kenya Ward, who keeps me on course; and all of the hardworking emissaries and officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—both at home and abroad—for their commitment to excellence and service to this country that we all love.

I believe that the country is fortunate to have such a diverse group of Bahamians whose sole purpose for existence is to achieve the best possible outcome for this nation and its people.

Mr. Speaker,

I'd also like to especially my colleague, friend and adopted little brother, H.E Reuben Rahming, our Ambassador to CARICOM.

In this role, the Member for Pinewood has been a complete team-player substituting where necessary and always sticking to the game plan. His performance has been stellar.

Mr. Speaker,

Training/development and technical assistance

Training and development in the Foreign Service—in this era of the pandemic—remained current, dynamic and critical.

This innovative method proved to be highly beneficial, resulting in more staff being trained at little to no cost. We seized the opportunities for our officers to participate in a range of workshops and seminars that were offered by esteemed institutions including the University of the West Indies Foreign Service Institute, the United Nations (UN), the Organization of American States (OAS) and others. Our brilliant young officers also devised seminars; inviting guests speakers from diverse sectors (e.g. Trade, Migration, Stress Management) in The Bahamas

Mr. Speaker,

More than thirty (30) partner countries and organizations have offered technical assistance to The Bahamas during the year 2021. Due to the pandemic, such offerings come in the form of virtual courses, virtual seminars and virtual workshops. The offers are open to persons in both the Public Service and general public. The Ministry simply acts as a conduit between facilitators and applicants desirous of taking advantage of seeking to take participate in these short-term online courses and scholarships.

Mr. Speaker,

Appointments, postings and recalls

A number of recalls and out postings of Foreign Service Officers were anticipated during 2020 and 2021 but were deferred because financial constraints and the lockdown of global borders.

Of note, however, were the appointments of H.E. Kenneth Russell who replaced H.E. Alvin Smith as High Commissioner in Canada. High Commissioner Smith is to be commended for his sterling service to The Bahamas during his tour of duty. High Commissioner Smith was in Canada at the height of the pandemic, and he spared no effort to assist Bahamians.

H.E. Capt. Whitfield Neely (retd.) will replace H.E. Jeffrey Williams as Ambassador to Haiti. I thank Ambassador Williams who was often forced to go over and beyond the call of duty to achieve the desired outcome during his posting. H.E. Chet Neymour replaced H.E. Sheila Carey as Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Ambassador Carey served with distinction during her tour of duty.

In addition to these movements, Foreign Service Officers were posted to jurisdictions where the needs were critical, namely, Haiti, Geneva and New York.

The pandemic has prevented most in-person farewell and first arrival calls on the Ministry by foreign envoys. Nevertheless, we were able to resume this function with a “*new normal*”. In the past year, virtual meetings were held for the purpose of receiving copies d’Usage from the new Ambassadors of Austria, France, Israel, Qatar, Indonesia, Egypt, Denmark, Argentina and the European Union, and the High Commissioners of Canada, India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sri. Lanka and the Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) and the UN Resident Coordinator. Using this platform, we have also said farewell to the outgoing Ambassador of Romania. We anticipate virtual presentations by Envoys from Japan and Norway. We also welcomed—in person—the recently arrived Ambassador of China and the Charge d’Affaires of the United States of America and said farewell (in person) to the Ambassador of Italy.

Mr. Speaker,

The Government of The Bahamas, since becoming independent, has appointed thirty six (36) Honorary Consuls in various parts of the world. The purpose for appointing these persons was to promote The

Bahamas and assist Bahamians in distress where the Government of The Bahamas had no representation either by way of a Mission or a Tourist Office. These appointments, have for the most part, truly shown their importance during this era the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused so many of our nationals to be displaced all around the world. We have recently completed a review of existing Honorary Consuls and in the result we made some changes. Currently, there are Twenty (24) Honorary Consuls, with the latest appointed in Detroit, Michigan, Dr. Williams Pickard a noted Afro-American academic, businessman and philanthropist.

Mr. Speaker,

Meetings, technical consultations and candidatures

During the current fiscal year travel to international meetings and conferences was suspended. The virtual space, however, enable our participation with the global community. We also supported the work of other Ministries in virtual meetings related to Health, Agriculture, Education, the Sustainable Development Goals and Security. Through the virtual medium we participated in the work of CARICOM, the Organization of America States (OAS), the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the United Nations. Our active participation included chairing the 50th OAS General Assembly earlier this year.

In this context, I am also pleased to report that The Bahamas joined the rest of CARICOM in electing its first female Secretary General, Dr. Carla Barnett of Belize. Dr. Barnett is highly competent and possess the skills to navigate the region through the current economic fallout and challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.

I also take this opportunity to wish outgoing SG of CARICOM, H.E. Irvin LaRocque, the very best possible future. Ambassador LaRocque was fastidious in his protection of our region, which he served the utmost dignity and diplomatic aplomb.

Mr. Speaker,

International organizations

The Government of The Bahamas' relationship with resident international organizations is in very good standing. These organizations include the OAS, Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture

(IICA), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI), United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

In May of this year, the UN Resident Coordinator opened an Office here in The Bahamas. Having a resident presence makes a difference in a country's relationship with an organization. By way of illustration, I refer to the OAS where during the early part of 2021, The Organization of America States has approved of seed funding through the Development Cooperation Fund Program 2021-2024 cycle to support national and multinational initiatives; strengthen institutional and human resources capacity and promote Triangular and South-South Cooperation.

The Bahamas has put forward Candidatures this year for re-election to the Council of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and election to the Council of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Normally, we would launch an extensive campaign of lobbying countries and holding social events to guarantee election to bodies such as this. However, operating under the new normal the campaigns has resulted in virtual campaigns that are proving cost effective and impactful.

Mr. Speaker,

Expression of gratitude

I would be remiss if I did not express our gratitude to the many regional and international agencies and non-governmental organizations (including the World Health Organization (WHO), Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA)) who have provided assistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian and continue to assist with our rebuilding efforts and the fight against COVID19.

Mr. Speaker,

Procurement of vaccines

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues to serve as an intermediary for the procurement of COVID19 vaccines and essential medical supplies through our bilateral relations. At this time, I extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to our regional, hemispheric and international counterparts for their donations and

continued support during these challenging times. Once again I highlight the kindness of the Government of India for the generous donation of twenty thousand (20,000) Astra Zeneca vaccines which was used to commence our vaccine campaign in our quest toward herd immunity.

Mr. Speaker,

Hurricane season

In preparing for this current hurricane season, my Ministry has again taken the proactive approach and requested humanitarian assistance from the international community should The Bahamas experience a catastrophic weather system.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continue to collaborate with the Ministry for Disaster Preparedness, Management and Reconstruction, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the international community with respect to disaster preparedness and response. Once again, I express sincere gratitude to our international partners (particularly India and the United States) for their generous donations of essential items which will further enhance our response to catastrophic events.

Mr. Speaker,

In expressing thanks to our international friends, I equally thank our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora. Our knowledge and engagement with the Diaspora was further enhanced during this pandemic and particularly during the closure of our border. The pandemic caused many within the Diaspora to register with our overseas offices for the first time, thereby increasing the respective databases of The Bahamas overseas Missions.

Mr. Speaker,

Maritime and Delimitation Committee

Members are aware that the mandate to delimit maritime boundaries between The Bahamas and those neighbouring countries with whom we share maritime space, is assigned to the Maritime Boundary Delimitation Committee which is situated within my Ministry.

At the end of 2019, the Maritime Delimitation Committee was in the final stages of discussions with the United States on the holding of the fourth round of negotiations aimed at coming to some joint arrangement in the Northern Sector of our maritime space. These negotiations which had been tentatively scheduled for early 2020, had to be placed on hold due to the global challenge of the coronavirus.

Similarly and for the same reason, plans to initiate discussions with the Republic of Haiti and the United Kingdom with regards to the Turks and Caicos Islands, were also put on hold. The Committee however, through the Maritime Division, is actively seeking to re-engage with both the US and the UK, the objective being to agree on the way ahead for the resumption of negotiations in this COVID-19 environment.

During this budgetary period and at the request of the former Government of the Turks and Caicos Islands, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Border Control Cooperation and a Ship Riders Agreement were drafted by the Ministry's Maritime Division in collaboration with the OAG and relevant stakeholders. Both documents were transmitted to TCI who has now returned them with minor suggested changes. My Ministry in collaboration with the OAG and other stakeholders are currently in the process of a final review. Upon completion, the documents will be presented to Cabinet for colleagues review and subsequent approval. Similar Agreements have been drafted for the Republic of Haiti and are currently under review by the Office of The Attorney General.

Mr. Speaker,

Office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister

The Office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister (OSPM) remain fully operational and continue to function in a professional, efficient manner and in compliance with the guidelines for operation of the Office as approved by the Cabinet of The Bahamas.

The Office continues to partner with The Bahamas Feeding Network and the Women and Girls Mentoring Coalition to provide food and essential items to numerous families on a weekly basis. In addition, the Office continues to create facilitations for women to empower themselves and hosted a series of training workshops over the past year to enhance skillset and promote entrepreneurship among Bahamian women.

Mrs. Minnis, continues to advocate against gender based violence and raise awareness for mental health. These issues have become a major concern in recent times due to the apparent increase in cases in light of the COVID19 pandemic.

During the past year, the Office of the Spouse of the Prime Minister has received international recognition through Mrs. Minnis engagement with diverse organizations including the International Association of First Ladies for Peace and the Global Youth Meet (GYM) Organization.

As the current Chair of the Spouses of CARICOM Leaders Action Network (SCLAN), Mrs. Minnis continues to promote the CariWaC Initiative (in the region) which is the Caribbean's response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Plans are underway to commence a collaborative awareness campaign for cervical cancer across the region due to the apparent increasing incidence of cervical cancer in Caribbean women.

Mr. Speaker,

Passport and Consular Services

I now turn my attention to the Passport Office and Consular Division.

Despite the challenges with office closure and rotation of staff, the Passport Office, its sub-offices and The Bahamas Consulate offices maintained operations and issued passports throughout the 2020/21 fiscal period.

In December 2020, the online portal was expanded to allow renewal of passports for applicants ages 15-17 years. In addition, the digital portal was incorporated into the Government's Interoperability Platform (mygateway.gov.bs) which permits the application and collection of passports and other government issued documents from a central location.

Mr. Speaker,

Subsequent to this accomplishment, the Passport Office extended its services via the opening of satellite offices on several family islands commencing with Exuma in February, Inagua and Long Island in March and Eleuthera in April. In the coming weeks, two additional Passport Offices will be opened—one in Bimini and one North Andros.

For the period under review, the Passport Office has enrolled forty three thousand, three hundred and sixty six applicants (43,366). Of this number, adult enrollment totaled twenty seven thousand, two hundred and eighty five (27,285), minor enrollment totaled seven thousand, nine hundred and eighty two (7,982) and eight thousand, ninety nine (8,099) online enrollment. The revenue collected by the Passport Office, its sub-offices and The Bahamas Consulates for the period of 1 July 2020 to May 2021 was one million, one hundred and eighty three thousand, forty five dollars (BSD1,183,045.00)

Mr. Speaker,

For the period under review, the Consular Division assisted the Department of Immigration with the repatriation of one thousand, fifty three (1,053) foreign individuals to their homelands; inclusive of seven hundred and thirteen (713) Haitian nationals and three hundred and forty (340) persons from other countries. The Division was also instrumental in assisting overseas Missions with deportation and the return of sixty two (62) Bahamians from the US to The Bahamas during the period of July 2020 to May 2021.

The Division continues to facilitate Bahamians in distress in foreign countries and in collaboration with our overseas Missions. During this fiscal year, the Consular Division together with our overseas Missions assisted five hundred and thirty nine (539) Bahamians who were distressed and/or displaced abroad. The Consular Division has also rendered assistance to sixteen (16) foreign nationals in distress in The Bahamas and served as an intermediary between relevant agencies including Honorary Consuls and Embassies.

For this budget year, the Consular Division Apostilled/Legalized four thousand, nine hundred and sixty seven (4,967) documents which generated a revenue of eight hundred and thirty seven thousand, five hundred and forty dollars (BSD837,540.00). For this same period, the Division issued one thousand thirty seven (1,037) visas for a revenue of one hundred and seventy three thousand, two hundred and forty dollars (BSD173,240.00).

Mr. Speaker,

During the Budget year 2020/2021 plans were adjusted in accordance with how the current fiscal budget was comparing to actuals.

Of the twenty eight million, eighty nine thousand, nine hundred and twenty dollars (BSD28,089,920) allotted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 2020/2021, a total of nine million, eight hundred and eighty four thousand,

two hundred and sixty three dollars (BSD9,884,263) was spent on personal emoluments which accounted for thirty five percent (35%) of the overall budget.

The remaining eighteen million, two hundred and five thousand, six hundred and fifty seven dollars (BSD18,205,657) was used to pay standing expenses including the country's membership fees to regional and international organizations and maintenance of The Bahamas' overseas Missions.

All international travel was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With respect to grants to international organizations there was a cut across the board; however we were able to move funds around to cover all invoices sent with regards to contributions on behalf of The Bahamas Government.

We prioritized our spending to address the greatest needs and maximize benefits. In this regard, funds were used to make the much needed repairs to the Mission and Chancery in Washington. In addition, final payments were made between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance on behalf of the Canadian Bank Note (CBN) to complete payments for the Epassport and Evisa systems.

Funding was also approved for an upgrade to the VIP Lounge at the Lynden Pindling International Airport (LPIA).

In the midst of the economic fallout stemming from the COVID19 pandemic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs generated a revenue of two million, one hundred and ninety three thousand, eight hundred and twenty five dollars (BSD2,193,825.00) for the 2020/21 fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker,

Mandates for the Foreign Ministry - 2017 Manifesto

The work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the last nearly four years as instructed by the Manifesto of the Free National Movement 2017.

1. Establishment of Embassy in Brussels

In an effort to mitigate the damaging effects of negative financial listings by the European Union on the banking and financial industries of The Bahamas, among other things, The Government opened and Embassy in Brussels, Belgium in November 2019.

2. Notable Ministry advancements

Passport Services

With the launch of our online Epassport renewal services in December 2020—among other things—have precipitated tremendous advancements in the delivery of Passport services to Bahamians—both at home and abroad—during this administration. Moreover, an operations unit has been established to bring more focus to enforcement, hurricane preparedness and other such issues in which the Foreign Ministry might engage:

- (a) Passport services online portal manifesting marked improvement in delivery of passports to Bahamians; in New Providence;
- (b) Reestablishment of Passport services to Bahamians in China;
- (c) Visa online services for international travelers coming to The Bahamas; and
- (d) Opened Passport (kiosks) Offices in Eleuthera, Exuma, Long Island and Inagua. Will open offices in North Andros and Bimini soon.

3. Participation in regional, hemispheric and international organizations

Under the FNM Administration, we have deliberately participated with all regional, hemispheric and international organizations both at the prime ministerial and ministerial levels:

- (a) The Prime Minister, the Most Honourable Dr. Hubert Alexander Minnis, has successfully participated in, and contributed to numerous meetings of CARICOM, Commonwealth Heads of Government, the United Nations, the ACP Committee of Ambassadors and more;
- (b) Bahamas hosted and chaired the Council for Foreign and Community Relations (COFCOR) Meeting in Nassau during May 2018;

(c) Bahamas served as President of the 50th Session of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) during 20-21 October 2020; and

(d) In the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian in September 2019, The Bahamas received visits by the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the OAS, Louis Almagro and the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Patricia Scotland.

The Bahamas currently serves in the following organizations:

(e) International Maritime Organization (IMO)

(f) Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

(g) Human Rights Council (HRC)

(h) HC Rahming is currently the Chair of Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD)

(i) The Most Honourable Dr. Hubert Minnis, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas is currently serving as the Chair for the Joint Tourism Policy Working Group in CARICOM

4. Improve relations with neighbours

It is our view that the many demonstrable activities toward firming up our relations with neighbours are manifested through the many strategic steps taken to improve regional relations:

(a) In its last, the United States of America nominated two Ambassadors to The Bahamas, albeit unsuccessfully. That said, nothing was more evident of the importance of our ties than the United States' response during, and after, the passage of Hurricane Dorian in 2019.

(b) Prime Minister attended high-level meeting in Florida at the invitation of President Donald Trump;

- (c) The Bahamas and the United States reengaged talks toward delimiting shared maritime boundaries;
- (d) The United Kingdom reestablished its High Commission in The Bahamas during February 2020 following a near 15-year absence;
- (e) Through deepening relations with Cuba and both the Prime Ministerial and Ministerial levels, we managed to convince Cuba to assist with the apprehension and handover of three (3) Dominican poaching vessels (motherships) seeking to evade arrest by fleeing into Cuban territorial waters;
- (f) Pending Maritime MOU and Shiprider Agreement with Turks & Caicos Islands (UK); and
- (g) Prime Minister led a high-level delegation of Cabinet Ministers to Haiti in an effort to address the illegal migration problem and discuss potential solutions to help keep migrants at home.

5. Engagement with Bahamian Diaspora

In an effort to more deliberately engage the Bahamian diaspora in the United States of America, the Prime Minister led delegations to Atlanta, Washington, Houston and Florida and I led the delegation in New York. Ministry official inclusive of Ambassador Kenya Ward, Consuls General Linda Mackey and Astra Armbrister-Rolle attended a conference focused on Diaspora development in Jamaica. The Ministry continues to work on a properly structured diaspora strategy and plan.

Mr. Speaker,

With that North Abaco supports the 2021-2022 budget!

May Almighty God continue to bless and keep the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

I thank you.