


# Unity and Resilience Frame National Thanksgiving Service

*Story on page 3*



**Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy:  
When I fall, I shaLL ARISE; when I sit in  
darkness, the LORD shall  
be a light unto me.  
Micah 7:8 (KJV)**

## A Year That Demands Maturity



by **Petra Williams**

The first days of 2026 have made one thing unmistakably clear: this will not be a year of drift, distraction, or division. From the pulpit of the National Service of Thanksgiving to the hard edges of global geopolitics, Antigua and Barbuda has entered the new year with both affirmation and tests of national maturity.

At the National Thanksgiving Service, leaders from the Government and the Opposition alike struck a common chord. The language differed, but the message converged: unity, resilience, faith, and responsibility are practical necessities. In a world unsettled by conflict, economic uncertainty, and environmental strain, small states survive not by volume but by cohesion,

discipline, and clarity of purpose.

That call resonates beyond ceremony. The latest Consumer Price Index figures remind households that economic progress, while real, is not felt evenly. Rising costs for education, food, and health heighten the urgency of policies that protect the vulnerable while sustaining growth. Stability cannot be taken for granted; it must be managed, measured, and shared.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Gaston Browne's New Year's message and his call for a national culture of excellence read less like aspiration and more like instruction. Excellence, as framed, is not elitism. It is discipline in governance, seriousness in citizenship, and consistency in national standards. It is the difference between reacting to events and shaping outcomes.

Recent developments underscore how quickly global forces can intersect with local realities. Flight cancellations from the United States, following heightened international tensions, show how external decisions ripple through tourism-dependent economies. Similarly, the confirmation that a senior West Indies Oil Company official was questioned by U.S. authorities, even without any violation, signals the level of scrutiny now facing state-owned entities and international partnerships. Transparency and calm explanation, rather than speculation or defensiveness, are essential in such moments.

At home, the Police Blotter offers a reminder that social stability is as

important as economic performance. Crime management, fraud investigations, and drug-related offenses speak to pressures that cannot be ignored or explained away. Public trust is reinforced not only by enforcement but also by prevention, fairness, and community engagement.

The broader reflections in this edition's features, from ministerial New Year's addresses to regional analysis of CARICOM's crossroads, reinforce a central truth: Antigua and Barbuda does not operate in isolation. Diplomacy, regional unity, and sound economic judgment are no longer optional tools; they are survival skills.

As *The Eye on the Economy* argues, 2026 must be the year we stop acting small. That does not mean ignoring our size or constraints. It means rejecting small-mindedness, pettiness, and performative outrage. It also means recognising that nation-building is a collective enterprise that requires effort from the Government, the Opposition, institutions, communities, and individuals alike.

The year has begun with prayer, data, warning signs, and opportunity. The task now is to respond with maturity. History will not measure 2026 by rhetoric alone but by whether Antigua and Barbuda chose unity over noise, excellence over excuses, and purpose over paralysis.

The year ahead will test leadership not by announcements, but by decision-making under pressure, clear communication with the public, and the ability to deliver on commitments.



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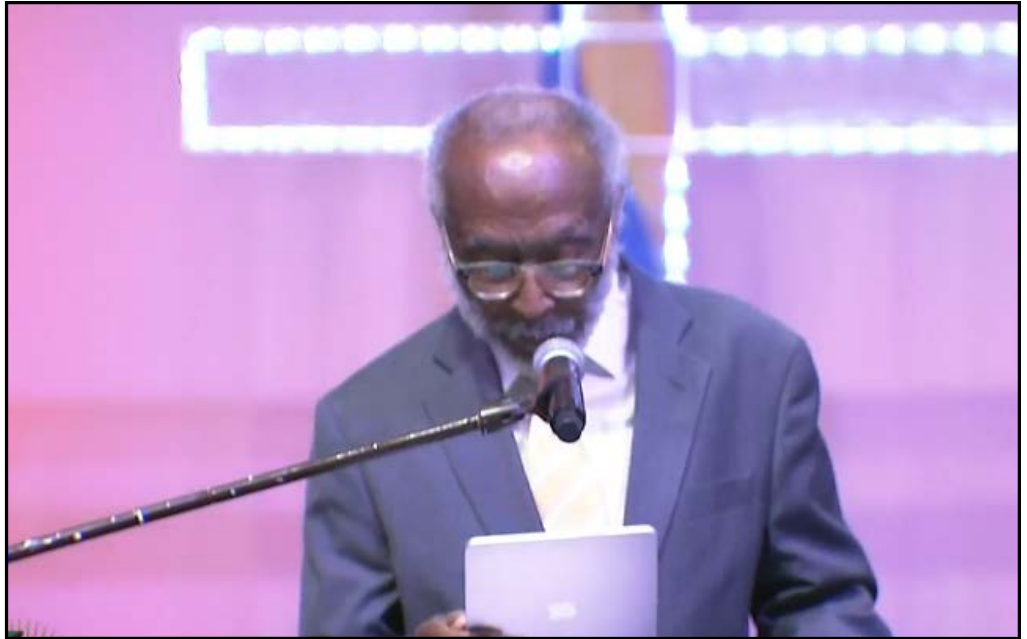
## Calls for Unity and Resilience Frame National Service of Thanksgiving

January 4, 2026 - Calls for unity, resilience, and faith marked the start of Antigua and Barbuda's new year on Sunday as national leaders gathered for the annual National Service of Thanksgiving, using the pulpit to reflect on global uncertainty, domestic challenges, and the shared responsibility of nation-building.

Addressing the congregation, Sir Clare Roberts, speaking on behalf of Governor General Sir Rodney Williams, urged Antiguan and Barbudans to pause and acknowledge their survival through what he described as unsettled times both globally and at home.

He pointed to international conflict, economic strain, and environmental pressures, while noting that the country had endured through faith, service, and community spirit. "Our survival is not accidental," Roberts said, crediting prayer, resilience, and the often-unseen work of families, churches, public servants, and first responders.

As the country enters 2026, Roberts appealed for compassion toward the elderly, the vulnerable, and those facing mental illness or homelessness. He also encouraged renewed attention to environmental care, calling on citizens to "love where we live" by keeping communities clean and orderly. Emphasizing education and lifelong



Sir Clare Roberts, speaking on behalf of Governor General Sir Rodney Williams



Prime Minister Gaston Browne



# Local News



**Sherfield Bowen, Deputy Leader of the United Progressive Party**

learning, he highlighted the role of the University of the West Indies in national development.

Before reading the First Lesson, Bowen used his remarks to frame the service as both a moment of gratitude and a test of national resolve. He noted that the Government has observed a National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving for 11 consecutive years, describing it as a reflection of his administration's commitment to faith and public service.

The Prime Minister described 2025 as a "year of bounty," citing progress in healthcare, education, and national development, while acknowledging that new challenges lie ahead. He called on Antiguan and Barbudans to stand "shoulder to shoulder" in pursuit of the long-stated goal of transforming the country into an economic powerhouse.

Browne also highlighted social measures aimed at protecting the most

vulnerable, including the expansion of food assistance programmes and the rollout of an initiative providing free building materials to poor and indigent households. He said his government would continue to govern "with integrity" and appealed to people of faith to keep the nation's leadership in prayer. From the opposition benches, Sherfield Bowen, Deputy Leader of the United Progressive Party, struck a reflective tone as he brought greetings at the close of the service.

Bowen spoke of his personal grounding in scripture, expressing a particular affinity for the Psalms, especially Psalms 120 to 134, which he said run "the gamut of the human spectrum," encompassing struggle, endurance, hope, and praise. He suggested that these passages offer guidance not only for individual faith, but for national conduct in times that demand discipline, maturity, and moral clarity.



**Apostle Dr. Steven C. Andrews**

Turning to regional affairs, Bowen warned of renewed anxiety as military conflict edges closer to the Caribbean, traditionally regarded as a zone of peace. He said the developments underscored the need for prayer, wisdom, and sound judgment, particularly for small states whose strength lies in unity and collective resolve rather than division.

He also reflected on domestic pressures, including concerns about finances, healthcare, and the resilience of national institutions, noting that such challenges require purpose-driven leadership and a shared commitment to higher standards in public life. "No successful nation has been built on calm waters," Bowen told worshippers, urging Antiguan and Barbudans to face difficulties with cohesion, responsibility, and faith, and to meet the year ahead with unity rather than fragmentation.



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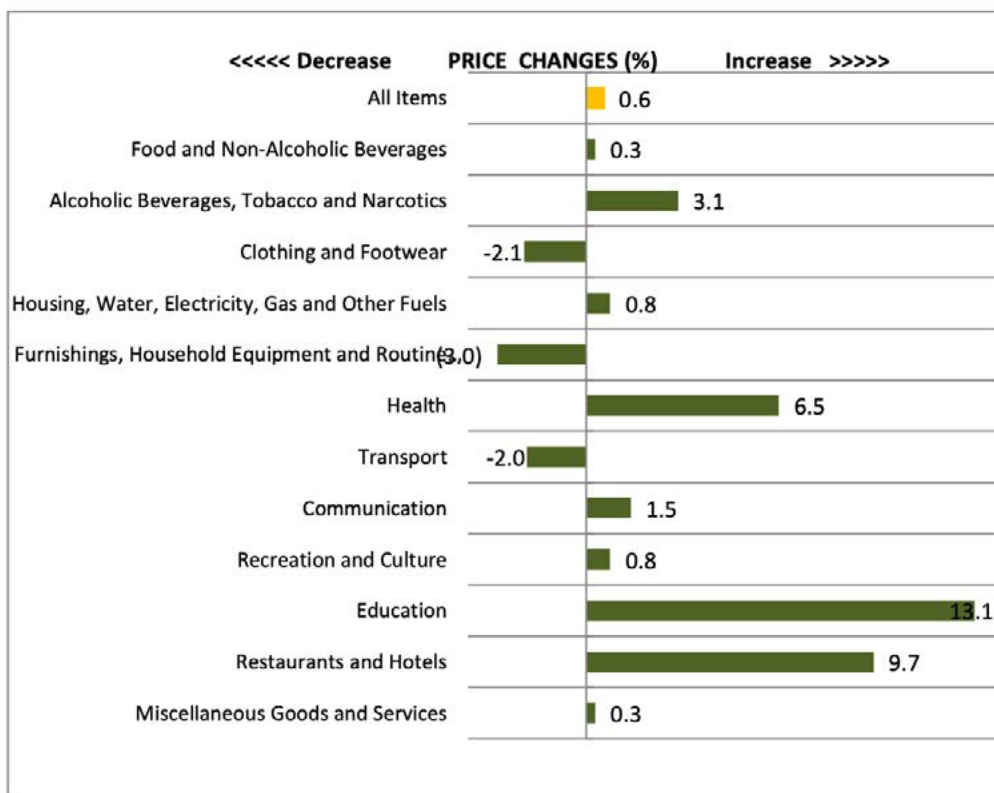







## CPI Up 0.6% Year-on-Year as Education and Services Drive Prices

Headline Inflation: Year-on-Year Changes for Sep 2025 compared to Sep 2024



The Consumer Price Index (CPI) for September 2025 rose by 0.6% year-on-year, reflecting modest inflation pressures even as prices edged downward on a month-to-month basis.

The data, released by the Statistics Division under the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Governance, paints a picture of an economy experiencing

selective price increases, particularly in services. At the same time, some food categories and transport costs offered consumers short-term relief.

Over the twelve months ending September 2025, prices increased in nine of the twelve major CPI categories. The strongest upward pressures came from: Education (+13.1%), Restau-

rants and Hotels (+9.7%), Health, Alcoholic Beverages, Tobacco and Narcotics

Food prices also contributed, though to a lesser extent. The Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages index increased 0.3% over the year, with contrasting movements across food groups.

Vegetables emerged as the standout, rising 6.2%, led by a sharp 9.2% increase in frozen, preserved or processed vegetables. Bread and cereals rose 1.2%, driven by higher prices for other cereals and flour products (+4.4%) and rice (+1.4%).


These increases were partly offset by notable declines in: Fish and Seafood (-7.4%), Fruit (-5.3%), Milk, Cheese and Eggs (-2.5%)

Meanwhile, All Items Less Food and Energy increased by 0.8%, underscoring persistent cost pressures in education, hospitality and communication services rather than basic household staples.

Prices Dip Month-to-Month



Despite the annual increase, September prices eased compared to August, with the overall CPI declining 0.3% month-to-month.

Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages fell 0.1%, while All Items Less Food



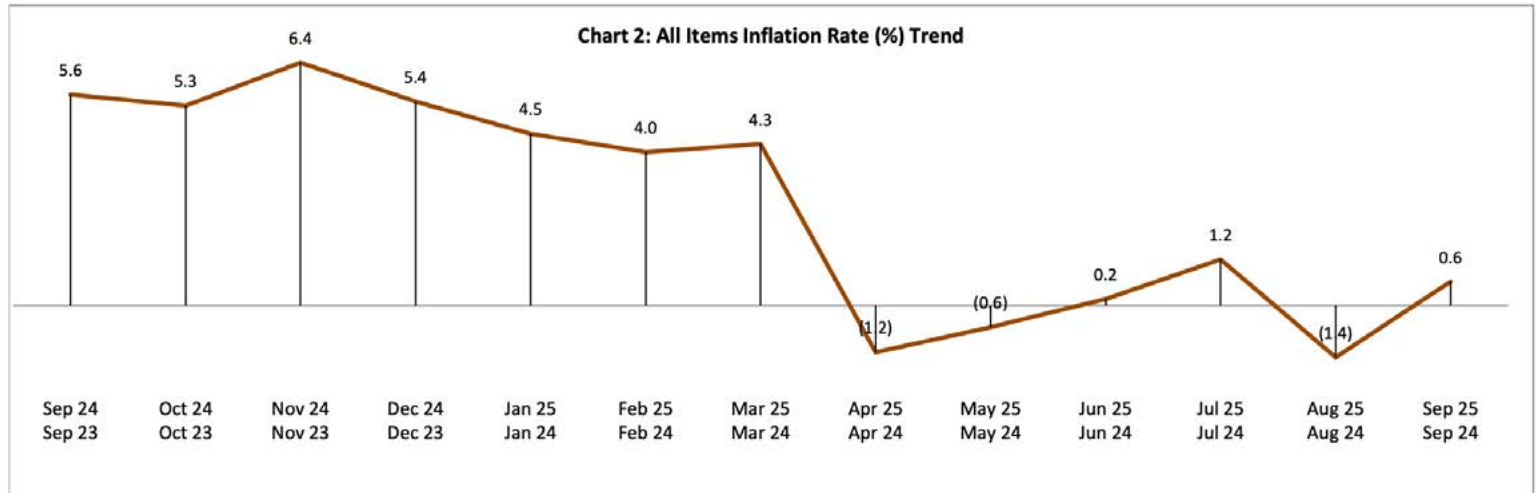
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# Local News

## Graphical Analysis of the Consumer Price Index



and Energy declined 0.4%, reflecting temporary relief for households.

Within food categories, four of nine supermarket groups recorded increases, led by:

Vegetables (+2.6%)

Meat and Meat Products (+1.6%)

Bread and Cereals (+1.2%)

However, sharper declines in Fish and Seafood (-4.8%), Milk, Cheese and Eggs (-3.9%), and Oils and Fats (-3.4%) pulled the overall food index down.

Non-alcoholic beverages saw a 1.1% decline, largely due to a steep 16.1% drop in Coffee, Tea and Cocoa prices.

Outside the food basket, falling Transport Services (-12.6%) and a 0.3% decline in actual rentals for housing were the main contributors to the monthly easing in prices.

### Reading the Numbers

The CPI measures changes in prices for goods and services typically purchased by households, using data collected monthly and quarterly from supermarkets and service providers.

Spending patterns are based on household budget surveys, with the current CPI structure reflecting expenditure weights from 2006.

While September's data suggests inflation remains contained overall, the sharp increases in education and hospitality costs highlight areas where households may continue to feel pressure, even as food and transport costs fluctuate.

Detailed CPI data for September 2025 is available from the National Bureau of Statistics.



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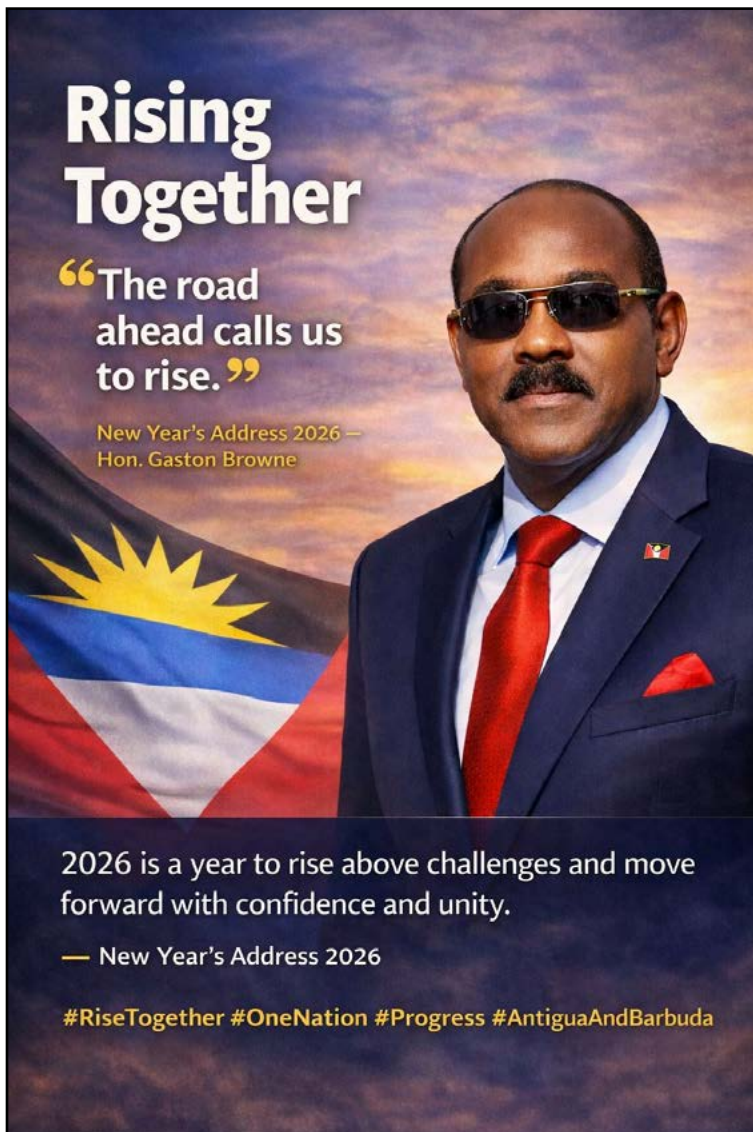
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## A Call to Discipline and Excellence: Reflecting on the Prime Minister's 2026 New Year Message



As Antigua and Barbuda crossed into 2026, Prime Minister Gaston A. Browne used his January 1 New Year's Address to do more than mark the passage of time. He framed the moment as a national checkpoint, urging citizens and residents to carry discipline, optimism, sacrifice, and collective resolve into the year ahead as the country seeks to convert recent gains into lasting resilience.

Looking back on the address, a central theme emerges clearly: confidence anchored in progress. The Prime Minister described Antigua and Barbuda as entering 2026 "more confident, more hopeful, and more prosperous" than at any previous point in its history, citing the steady maturation of a people-centred economy and social advancement guided by deliberate policy choices.

The address also acknowledged the realities of a shifting global environment. Prime Minister Browne referenced recent geopolitical developments affecting small states, including the United States' decision to restrict the issuance of new visas for nationals of Antigua and Barbuda. Notably, he sought to steady public concern by confirming that existing U.S. visas remain valid, while noting that the Government has already commenced constructive engagement and technical work to establish an orderly process for future visa issuance.

Diplomacy featured prominently in the Prime Minister's message. He reaffirmed Antigua and Barbuda's long-standing relationship with the United States and underscored the country's commitment to respectful international engagement as it navigates policy shifts affecting multiple countries. Regionally, he reiterated the nation's commitment to CARICOM, stressing that even where differences arise, unity and mutual respect remain indispensable tools for small states operating in an increasingly complex global arena.

Beyond foreign affairs, the address carried a strong so-

cial and civic undertone. Reflecting on the message, the Prime Minister's call for unity stood out as a deliberate counterweight to division, misinformation, and public quarrels. He urged Antiguan and Barbudans to view themselves as one family, bound by shared responsibility and mutual respect.

The address also placed emphasis on personal and collective standards. Civic pride, national cleanliness, entrepreneurship, skills development, lifelong learning, and a culture of excellence were presented not as slogans but as habits necessary to sustain growth and build a stakeholder society in which progress is broadly shared.

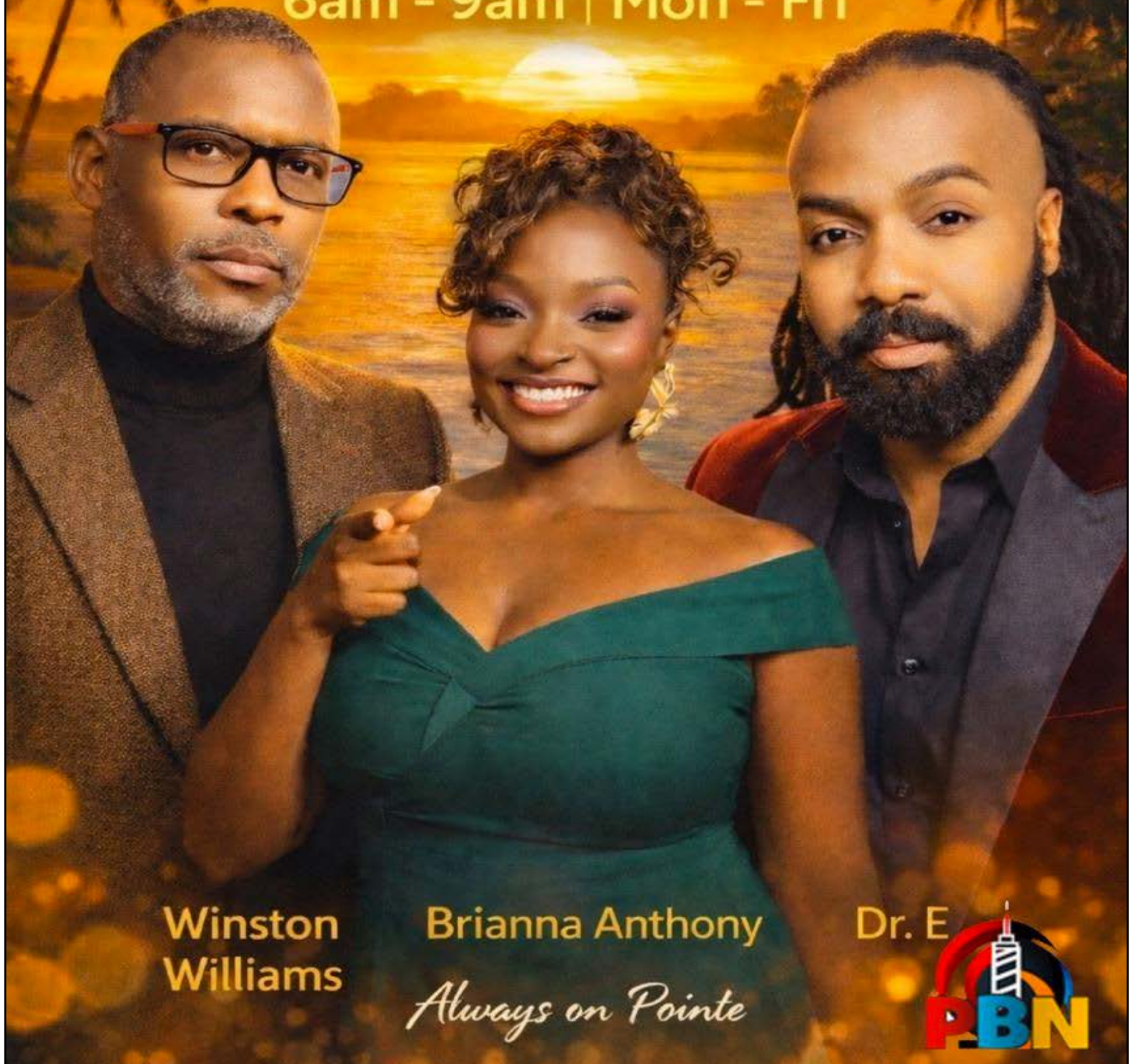
In closing his New Year message, Prime Minister Browne expressed confidence that with solidarity, discipline, and a continued commitment to peace, love, and unity, Antigua and Barbuda can move forward as a resilient, competitive, and globally respected nation. Seen in reflection, the address sets a clear benchmark against which 2026 will ultimately be measured—not only by economic performance, but by the nation's ability to live up to the standards it has set for itself.



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## Browne Confirms WIOC Official Was Questioned by U.S. Authorities

January 3, 2027 - Prime Minister Gaston Browne has confirmed that a senior official of the West Indies Oil Company (WIOC) was questioned by United States authorities during a recent trip to the U.S.

Speaking on Pointe FM's Browne and Browne Show on Saturday, the Prime Minister said he became aware of the matter after reading a report published by Real News Antigua and subsequently contacting WIOC Chief Executive Officer Gregory Georges to establish the facts.

"I saw the publication on Real News and I spoke to Gregory Georges," Browne said.

According to the Prime Minister, Georges confirmed that he was detained and questioned by U.S. authorities and that his electronic devices were temporarily taken during the process.

"He told me that he was questioned and that his laptop and phone were taken, but later returned to him," Browne said.



**Prime Minister Gaston Browne speaking on the Browne and Browne show**

Prime Minister Browne noted that WIOC's Venezuelan shareholding predated the imposition of U.S. sanctions and emphasized that the company remained compliant following the introduction of those sanctions.

"There has been absolutely no violation whatsoever," the Prime Minister said.

He explained that the questioning appeared to be linked to ongoing international scrutiny surrounding Ven-

ezuela's historical 25 percent shareholding in WIOC.

"I'm just stating what the issues are as I know them," Browne added.

The Prime Minister did not indicate that any action would be taken against the WIOC official, stating that his comments were intended to clarify the situation amid heightened international attention on Antigua and Barbuda and its state-owned entities.



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# Former Senator Greg Walter Passes

It was announced yesterday that Gregory Walter has died. He served the nation of Antigua and Barbuda as a Senator and as Chairman of the Board of Education under the United Progressive Party Administration. He served as Charter President of the Rotaract Club in 1986.

He was an entrepreneur, politician, and community activist.

Walter was the son of the late Sir George Herbert Walter.

The Board, Management and Staff of Pointville Communications express condolences to Mr Walter's family circle.



## Quiet New Year's Day Delivery Celebrated at SLBMC

The Sir Lester Bird Medical Centre marked a quiet yet heart-warming start to the New Year with a single delivery recorded on New Year's Day.

Hospital officials confirmed that Junique Charles Archibald of Pares Village gave birth to a healthy baby girl at 5:08 p.m. The newborn weighed eight pounds, eleven ounces, and both mother and child were reported to be in good health.

In recognition of the occasion, SLBMC Maternity Ward Departmental Manager Sister Annemarie Browne Issac made a presentation to Mrs. Archibald, acknowledging the first and only delivery recorded for the day.

Mrs. Archibald, speaking with PBN News, expressed appreciation for the care she received during her stay



**Junique Charles Archibald  
Sister Anne Marie Browne Issac  
Dr. Eldean Atiba Eudelle**

on the maternity ward. She praised the nurses and medical staff for their professionalism, support, and compassion throughout the delivery and postnatal period.



Hospital officials noted that although only one birth was recorded on New Year's Day, the moment remained a meaningful and celebratory one for both staff and family.

Pointe Express joins in extending congratulations and best wishes to the Archibald family for a healthy and happy year ahead.



# Police Blotter

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*St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda — Saturday, January 3, 2026*

## Man Charged with Crack/Cocaine Possession Following Grays Green Operations

The police have arrested and charged 40-year-old Gemini Browne of Perry Bay for Unlawful Possession of Crack/Cocaine.

The charge arose from a series of targeted police operations conducted in the Grays Green community. During one such operation on Thursday,



Browne was intercepted by officers at Perry Bay, where he was found in possession of 0.7 grams of crack/cocaine.

He was taken into custody and subsequently charged. Investigations are ongoing.

## Three Men Held in Fraud Investigation Involving Unauthorized Electronic Transfers

Three men are currently in police custody assisting with investigations into multiple reports of Unauthorized Electronic Transfer of Funds.

On Friday, January 2, police intercepted a white Toyota Ractis along Friendly Alley. The vehicle was driven by a 25-year-old man of Golden Grove and occupied by a 19-year-old man of Cooks Extension and a 28-year-old man of Golden Grove Ex-

tension.

All three were arrested on suspicion of fraud-related offences and taken to St. John's Police Station. As part of the ongoing investigation, search warrants were executed at their respective residences.

During the searches, police seized one silver HP laptop, a Digicel mobile phone, and a storage vault. Investigations are continuing,



and further updates will be provided as information becomes available.

## Villa Man Charged with Drug Offences and Escaping Lawful Confinement

Police have arrested and formally charged 35-year-old Derol Thomas of Villa in connection with drug-related offences and escaping lawful confinement, following an incident that occurred on December 31, 2025.

The arrest stemmed from a stop-and-search operation conducted by officers attached to the Gang and Guns Suppression Unit (GAGSU) on Pope-

shead Street. During the operation, Thomas fled the scene, abandoning a motor vehicle that later collided with a police vehicle.

A subsequent search of the abandoned vehicle resulted in the discovery of a quantity of cannabis. Thomas was later apprehended and taken into custody at Police Headquarters. While in lawful custody, he escaped and was subse-

quently restrained by officers.

Following investigations, Thomas was charged with: Possession of 466.1 grams of Cannabis, Possession of Cannabis with Intent to Transfer, and Escaping Lawful Confinement.

He is expected to appear before the court to answer to the charges.

**The Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda continues to intensify operations aimed at combating criminal activity and improving public safety. Members of the public with information relating to drug offences, financial fraud, or other crimes are encouraged to contact the Criminal Investigations Department or Crimestoppers.**

— END —



# E.P. Chet Greene Declares 2026 the Year of the Youth in St. Paul's



My friends, my neighbors, my family of St. Paul's,

Here we are thankfully and prayerfully on the shore of this new year, 2026... let us pause and listen. Listen to the sound of hope being born again. It is in the morning breeze over our hills and along the shorelines from Momora to Rendezvous Bay, in the resilient spirit of our people and in the quiet, powerful prayers of thanksgiving we lift to God for the miraculous gift of life and for this new beginning. Happy New Year!

Today, we are not merely turning the page on a calendar; we are in fact stepping onto the fertile ground of a shared promise, and the most sacred part of that promise is our youth—the ones who we today entrust with beating life into our plans for community rebirth. I proudly, on this the first day of the new year, on behalf of our entire community, declare 2026 the Year of the Youth here in our St. Paul's.



Let us speak of them not as a future to be prepared for but as a mighty force to be unleashed now. This year, we hand them additional tools to shape their destiny and, in doing so, reshape our entire community. A catalyst on this journey is the soon-to-be-completed Leroy 'Billy' Tonge Technical Center in Liberta, which stands as a testament to this belief—my belief in our youth. More than a building, it is a beacon. To every young person listening: that light is for you. Walk into its halls and seize your purpose, whether in cosmetology, architecture, or in selected areas of the building trades. Let your hands learn skills that will build your future homes and businesses. This is your inheritance. I invite you to claim it.

A community, we know, cannot be built by one pillar. Communities are built on foundations of collective courage and care.

Accordingly, in 2026 we will march forward on the road to home owner-

ship, turning the dream of a key in one's own door into a common reality. We will kindle the fire of entrepreneurship, for the economic soul of St. Paul's is fed by the innovation of its people.

We will nurture our spiritual roots, knowing very well that a people united in faith cannot be divided by challenge.

In all we do, we will continue to honor our elders with unwavering comfort and support, while ensuring that every single child in our community has the books, the guidance, and the chance they deserve to succeed.

This work requires all of us. It requires us to see our newly upgraded health facilities in Liberta and Cobbs Cross not as distant buildings but as monuments to our shared well-being. Use them, protect them—they are yours. It requires the persistence and patience to see our roadways and water services renewed, piece by piece, dip by drip, until the job is done.



# Feature

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To our athletes who carry our pride on their shoulders: run, jump, play with the knowledge that we see you and appreciate you. We are committed to building a community where your discipline is a recognized pathway for others, where your victories lift every spirit in St. Paul's.

None of this is a distant fantasy. It is the next chapter of our story, written by the same hands that have made St. Paul's the cleanest, most proud community in our nation. Your trust, your patience, your relentless partnership is the ink on that page.

I implore us to move into 2026 not with a whisper of hope but with a chorus of commitment. Let us live out the scripture that teaches us to "Love each other deeply... offering hospitality to one another without grumbling." Let us be, in the truest sense, our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

Let this be our collective resolution: to build here, in St. Paul's—our beloved



community—a community that shines not just for its cleanliness but for its compassion, its opportunity, and its unshakeable faith.

I wish you a year of profound health, boundless happiness, purposeful work, and above all, God's everlasting peace.

May He bless us and keep us. May He bless and keep our St. Paul's.

Happy New Year and best wishes for a healthy, happy, prosperous, and productive 2026.

God bless you!



## DAILY PROGRAMMING




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| <b>WITH ROGER LAKE</b>      | <b>6AM-9AM SATURDAYS</b>                 |
| <b>TOUCHLINE</b>            | <b>7PM-9PM MON. - THURS.</b>             |
| <b>WITH EPILUS</b>          |                                          |
| <b>BAD COMPANY</b>          | <b>2PM-6PM THURS. 12PM-4PM SATURDAYS</b> |
| <b>LIVE FROM THE V.I.</b>   | <b>&amp; 1PM-5PM ON SUNDAYS</b>          |
| <b>REGGAE INSPIRATION</b>   | <b>9PM-12AM MON. THURS. SUNDAY</b>       |
| <b>WITH SELECTOR KEEGAN</b> |                                          |
| <b>JAH WADADLI</b>          | <b>7PM-9PM FRIDAYS</b>                   |
| <b>WITH DJ JAH WADADLI</b>  |                                          |



## New Year's Message to the Team at the Ministry of Social and Urban Transformation



### *Forward Together into a New Year of Purpose and Impact*

As we welcome a new year, I want to sincerely thank each of you for the dedication, resilience, and compassion you bring to the work of the Ministry of Social and Urban

Transformation. Your efforts touch lives every day, often in ways that are not always seen, but are deeply felt by the people we serve.

Moving forward together is more than a phrase. It reflects our shared commitment to unity, teamwork, and collective responsibility. The challenges facing our communities are complex, but when we advance side by side with empathy, professionalism, and purpose, we become a powerful force for positive change.

In the year ahead, let us recommit ourselves to innovation, accountability, and service excellence. Let us continue to strengthen our programmes, uplift the most vulnerable, and transform not only physical spaces, but lives and communities. Every role within this Ministry matters, and every

contribution moves Antigua and Barbuda closer to a more inclusive and resilient society.

I am proud of the work we have done, and even more confident in what we can achieve together in the year ahead. Let us move forward with renewed energy, bold ideas, and an unshakable belief in the power of service.

May the new year bring you good health, strength, and fulfilment. Thank you for standing with me and with each other as we move forward together.

Happy New Year and continued blessings.

Hon. Rawdon Turner

Minister of Social and Urban Transformation







## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **IT'S OFFICIAL: ANTIGUA CARNAVAL 2026 REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN!**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - Monday 05th January 2026 - St. John's, Antigua.....**

The Antigua Barbuda Festivals Commission is pleased to announce that registration is now officially open for all categories for Antigua Carnival 2026.

**Registration is open to the following categories:**

- |                               |                              |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ✓ Business Floats             | ✓ Mas Band                   |
| ✓ Calypso Monarch             | ✓ Monday Wear                |
| ✓ Cheerleaders                | ✓ Mr. & Miss Teenage Pageant |
| ✓ Individual Mas              | ✓ Party Monarch              |
| ✓ J'ouvert Tropes Band        | ✓ Prince & Princess          |
| ✓ Junior Calypso Monarch      | ✓ Queen of Carnival          |
| ✓ Junior Carnival Private Mas | ✓ Road March                 |
| ✓ Junior Carnival School Mas  | ✓ T-Shirt Mas                |
| ✓ Junior Party Monarch        | ✓ Vendors                    |

**Where to Collect Forms:**

- ✓ National Festivals Office, 1st Floor, Cecil George-John Building, Corn Alley & Redcliffe Street
- ✓ Ministry of Creative Industries, Old Parham Road (Upstairs KFC/INET Building)

**Hours:**

- ✓ Monday - Thursday: 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
- ✓ Friday: 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

**To request forms, email [info.nof@ab.gov.ag](mailto:info.nof@ab.gov.ag) or contact via WhatsApp at (268) 727-9201. For inquiries, call (268) 462-4707.**

**Submission Details:**

**Completed registration forms must be returned to:**

- ✓ National Festivals Office, 1st Floor, Cecil George-John Building, Corn Alley & Redcliffe Street

Join in the excitement for Antigua Carnival 2026 for an unforgettable experience!



# CARICOM at the Crossroads of Pressure



As 2025 draws to a close, the Caribbean Community stands at a moment that calls for less rhetoric and more realism. CARICOM is experiencing a period in which external pressure is intensifying, new norms are hardening among powerful states, and the need for small states to navigate emerging demands is growing.

The central challenge before CARICOM is not disagreement between governments. Diversity of view is inevitable among governments, which are transient by nature and whose policies are shaped by domestic political cycles. The deeper question is whether all governments—acting as a community of interests—can strengthen collective planning and coordination in a world where economic, political and security shocks increasingly spill across borders.

Economic stress in one CARICOM country never remains confined. The region's economies are interlinked through trade, investment, labour movement, tourism and financial flows. Intra-CARICOM exports—particularly from the more industrialised CARICOM economies—have direct implications for revenues, employ-

ment and growth across the Community. A downturn in any one economy translates into lost income and reduced demand across regional supply chains. Political stress behaves similarly. When a member state faces external pressure or coercion, even well-intended but qualified support within the Community can dilute deterrence, signal hesitation and encourage further testing of regional resolve. Therefore, CARICOM's unity must be expressed not only in declarations, but in timely, consistent and unambiguous collective action.

This reality applies equally to Guyana. Oil and gas revenues have transformed its national prospects, but wealth does not confer immunity from geopolitical risk or diplomatic pressure. Guyana looks to all CARICOM governments for political and diplomatic support on matters touching its territorial integrity—just as Belize has long relied on the Community's consistent backing in defence of its borders and independence. A weakened Community would be less persuasive in defending its members when pressure mounts. That is why Guyana and Belize, no less than others, have a stake in helping to bolster the economic resilience of all CARICOM countries.

Against this backdrop, recent public questioning of CARICOM's reliability misses the larger point. For more than 50 years, CARICOM has provided a framework for cooperation in trade, security, health, disaster response and diplomacy. The record is imperfect, but the outcomes are real—and without them, individual states would be far more exposed.

In security, the facts are clear. CARICOM does not support drug trafficking, organised crime or illicit enterprise. On the contrary, the Community has worked closely with each other and with international partners, including the United States, through intelligence-sharing, law-enforcement coordination and maritime security

mechanisms. These arrangements are professional, active and indispensable. Similarly, CARICOM's advocacy of the Caribbean as a zone of peace reflects respect for international law, the peaceful settlement of disputes and the recognition that stability is the foundation of economic survival. For small states, peace is a necessary condition for prosperity.

What distinguishes this moment is the accumulation of pressures that now require greater collaboration, not less. Storm clouds are forming over the citizenship-by-investment (CBI) programmes operated by five CARICOM states. The European Union has signalled a decisive hardening of its position, suggesting that the existence of such programmes may, in itself, justify the suspension of visa-free travel to the Schengen area, regardless of reforms undertaken—a shift from conditional scrutiny to structural opposition.

At the same time, the United States has made clear that CBI programmes across the region are under close scrutiny, with particular focus on identity verification, security vetting and the integrity of passport issuance. If these pressures intensify, the consequences will extend beyond the five states involved, affecting investment flows, fiscal stability, financial services and confidence across the region.

This is why the countries that operate CBI programmes must redouble their efforts to ensure that applicant vetting meets the highest international standards; that jointly agreed regulatory and oversight frameworks are fully and consistently implemented; that breaches attract prompt sanctions; and that the systems are insulated from corruption or political interference. Every reasonable step must be taken to reassure international partners that Caribbean CBI programmes are secure, credible and effectively enforced.

Visa policy has also become a sharper instrument of leverage in international relations. Measures applied to one



country can widen unless concerns are addressed early and collectively. The economies of all CARICOM states depend on mobility for tourism, education, business travel, remittances and diaspora engagement. No government can afford a fragmented response.

Another pressure point has emerged around the Cuban medical cooperation programme, which in 2025 became a central issue in US policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean. Governments face a genuine dilemma: health systems rely heavily on these medical personnel, yet geopolitical realities and international conventions cannot be ignored. Responsible governance requires preparation—developing alternatives to protect public health services—while engaging candidly with all partners, including Cuba.

These challenges share a common feature. Each reflects the asymmetry of power between small states and larger partners. None can be managed effec-

tively by individual countries acting alone. All underscore the need for reciprocity in international relations.

Cooperation, however, cannot mean acquiescence without regard to consequence. If small states are expected to alter policies that affect livelihoods, revenues and social stability, then powerful partners must recognise the costs imposed and engage in solutions that preserve viability, not merely compliance. Reciprocity must be negotiated and agreed—not imposed.

For the Caribbean, strong and predictable relations with the United States remain indispensable. The region's objective must be partnership that recognises the constraints small states face and the shared benefits of stability, growth and democratic resilience. CARICOM's task is clear. The Community must move from coordination after the fact to planning in advance: shared risk assessment, early consultation and collective strategies that pre-

vent external pressures from forcing unilateral decisions.

As 2026 begins, CARICOM faces a choice. It can treat each challenge as a national problem to be managed alone or recognise that the future resilience of the Caribbean depends on planning together, speaking with discipline and acting with foresight.

In a world where power is impatient and rules are applied unevenly, small states endure not by standing apart, but by standing together—clear-eyed about risks, prepared for change and united in purpose. That should be the work of every CARICOM government in the year ahead.

(The author is the Ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to the United States and the OAS, and Dean of the OAS Ambassadors accredited to the OAS. Responses and previous commentaries: [www.sirronaldsanders.com](http://www.sirronaldsanders.com))



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# EYE ON THE ECONOMY: 2026 – The Year We Stop Acting Small



By Petra Williams

As I read Prime Minister Gaston Browne's New Year's Address, I felt a philosophy of leadership that sat quietly beneath the words. It was not the script of a government scrambling to survive but a call to the people of Antigua and Barbuda to step into our future. By the time I got to the last sentence, the overall message to me was that 2026 is the year we stop acting small.

One line captured it perfectly: "The year before us offers something even greater, the opportunity to turn success into permanence." Antigua and Barbuda is moving from recovery into consolidation; from managing crisis into locking in stability; from scrambling to standing firm.

**Leadership: The Key Tool of Transformation**

In the text, the Prime Minister framed leadership itself as an instru-

ment of development. This is in line with lessons from history. Exemplary leadership is a critical success factor when economies transform, and a key plank when economies tank.

When he said:

"Leadership is not privilege. It is commitment... the quiet courage to stand firm, when it would be easier to capitulate, or step aside... to serve my people, lift them up, empower them and keep alight the flame of hope entrusted to my hands."

He was not talking about popularity. He was talking about change-making.

At times controversial and confrontational, two traits that often unsettle conservative comfort zones, it is clear that Prime Minister Browne has embraced the full burden of moving Antigua and Barbuda beyond what is familiar and into what is possible.

Big transitions are never comfortable. They always upset entrenched interests. They always provoke noise. But no society ever becomes an economic powerhouse by governing for applause.

**Why Scale Is a Mindset, Not a Size**

I often remind myself that Antigua and Barbuda is not as small as we imagine.

Our landmass is larger than the combined area of globally famous places like Manhattan (23 square miles) and the Bronx (42 square miles). Those places did not become cosmopolitan by accident. They became what they are through vision, planning, and leadership that refused to be intimidated by criticism and resistance.

Dubai did not begin as a global city. It began as a small, localised settlement that evolved to a worldwide



symbol of a first-class nation when bold leadership married intentional resource use over time.

That is the lens through which I hear this government's message. We are not too small to think big. We are too used to thinking small.

## From Scrambling to Standing Firm

Those of us who live here know how much this matters.

We have spent years watching our country fight through debt crises, hurricanes, COVID, economic sector collapses, and global financial shocks. Every budget felt like a balancing act. Every year felt uncertain.

Now, for the first time in a long while, the Prime Minister is speaking from a place of relative stability. Not perfection. But stability.

That is why 2026 is being framed as the year to institutionalise progress. Once you reach that point, the conversation changes. It is no longer about what the government must save. It becomes about what a nation must build.

## External Factors: the Challenge Maturity

When the Prime Minister turned to the United States visa restrictions, it warranted keen attention.

There was no panic or political theatre. He reassured the public and said Antigua and Barbuda would engage constructively in the quest to resolve the matter.

The position presented removed the feeling of a beggar's posture in this situation that had plagued me for days. It replaced it with confidence that my government will not negotiate from a position of mendicants outside the door.

## Caricom Without the Naivety

I was delighted with the firm statement on regional unity and the commitment to solidarity, mixed

with a firm reminder that Antigua and Barbuda contributes economic and political value to the region. We matter! Our economy, our labour market, and our long history of regional support give Antigua and Barbuda a rightful seat at the Caricom table.

## The Real Challenge Is 'We'

The Prime Minister addressed us directly and our role in our future. He spoke about discipline, work ethic, skills, entrepreneurship, excellence, and civic pride.

I heard that as a message to all of us: the next stage of development is no longer just about government. It is about culture.

You cannot become an economic powerhouse with poor habits, dirty spaces, weak productivity, and low expectations.

Nation-building is not a spectator sport. Every one of us has a role. 'AH FU WE SUBBEN!! We must answer duty's call.

The call includes being analytical and being critical, even! But we must, even from spaces where we have opposing views, keep on hand to the plough of national development. We must work, innovate, transform, together.

## Why the Stakeholder Society Matters

In the Prime Minister's dialogue on stakeholder society, a blueprint for a deeper transformation was unveiled.

Foreign Direct Investment is vital, but nationals must have a real stake in economic growth and wealth creation. This is one of the key challenges that is at the forefront of any forward planning.

In the absence of a broad base of willing and able national investors

at the highest level, a characteristic flaw of small islands across the globe, we were reminded that the government continues to invest in creating opportunities for wealth creation. Some examples include housing projects, land sales, and divestment of public enterprises.

This is how countries, like Antigua and Barbuda, move from being places people work in to places people own.

## My Bottom Line

This New Year's Address was a statement of national intent.

Many challenges still confront us as a nation. Each of us can produce our preferred top issues. If we dominate our vision with negativity, it will make climbing the ladder for success difficult. We must address our weaknesses, but from a position of strength.

2026 is the year Antigua and Barbuda stops behaving like a small, vulnerable island and repositions as a self-confident, investment-grade state.

That journey will not be quiet. It will not always be comfortable. And it will demand leadership that stands firm even when it is lonely and/or unpopular. But that is how real transformation happens.

I will always question, analyse, and demand clarity. I will also recognise when a country is being invited to step into something bigger than fear.

Actively committed to the forward movement of my beloved, Antigua and Barbuda. Standing, "strong and firm, in peace of danger to safeguard our native land".

For more Eye On The Economy Features, visit [www.petrathespectator.com](http://www.petrathespectator.com)





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## Restrictions lifted on flights from US to Caribbean and South America

Restrictions that temporarily barred United States airlines from operating in parts of the Caribbean and South American airspace were lifted early Sunday, allowing flights to resume after a day of widespread disruptions.

The limits followed multiple Notices to Airmen issued Friday by the Federal Aviation Administration, citing safety risks linked to military activity in Venezuela across Curaçao, Maiquetia, Piarco, and San Juan flight information regions.

US Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy said late Saturday that the restrictions expired at midnight Eastern Time and that airlines were clearing backlogs.

He also advised travellers to check directly with carriers as schedules were updated.

United Airlines said it was preparing to resume Caribbean flights, beginning with service to San Juan, Puerto Rico, after hundreds of cancellations at Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport on Saturday.

The airline expects to operate most scheduled flights on Sunday and plans additional services to assist affected passengers.

JetBlue also began restoring service and said it may add extra flights.

The carrier said about 215 flights were cancelled during the disruption and urged customers to monitor flight status online or through its mobile app.

Meanwhile, in Europe, a conflict-zone advisory for Venezuelan airspace issued by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency re-



mained in effect, but Dutch carrier KLM said it would operate scheduled flights on Sunday after cancelling services to several Caribbean destinations a day earlier. (CMC)



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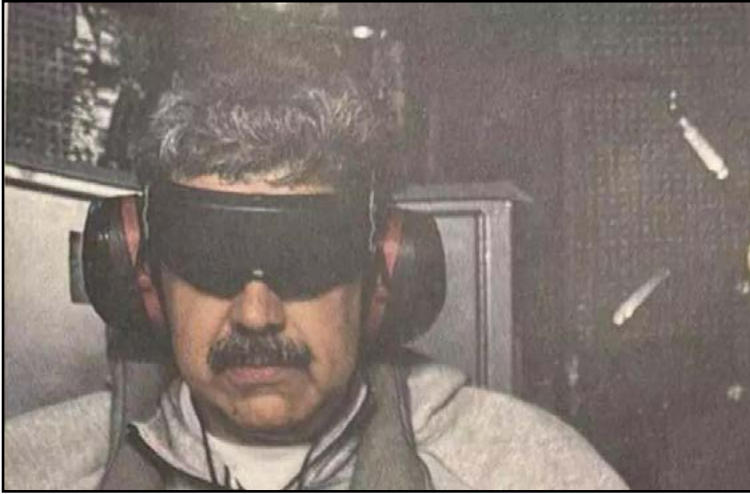
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# Regional News

## CARICOM Warns of “Grave Concern” After U.S. Military Action in Venezuela and Capture of President Maduro



Regional leaders moved swiftly early Saturday after reports of U.S. military action in Venezuela, with the Caribbean Community warning that the developments pose serious risks for the wider region.

The Conference of Heads of Government of Caribbean Community convened in emergency session on January 3, describing the situation as one of “grave concern” and confirming that it is closely monitoring events as they unfold.

In a brief statement, the bloc said the reported strikes could have implications for neighbouring states and promised further updates as information becomes available.

The response follows claims by U.S. President Donald Trump that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were captured during pre-dawn military operations in and around Caracas.

Trump said the operation, which targeted areas includ-

ing Miranda, Aragua and La Guaira, was carried out in coordination with U.S. law enforcement agencies.

According to the communiqué, President Maduro declared a state of external commotion and ordered the full deployment of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces, along with the activation of all national defence plans. Citizens and political and social organisations were urged to mobilise in defence of the country’s independence and sovereignty.

The statement also invoked Venezuela’s history of resistance to foreign intervention, referencing its long struggle for independence and the 1902 naval bombardment.

Concluding the communiqué, authorities called for national unity, quoting former president Hugo Chávez: “In the face of any new difficulties, whatever their magnitude, the response of all patriots... is unity, struggle, battle, and victory.” (Antigua.news)

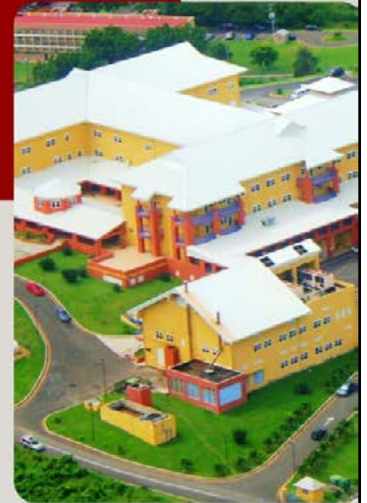
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## Women playing more dominant role in human trafficking

Children's Advocate and National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Diahann Gordon Harrison, says that women are gradually assuming a more dominant role in human trafficking.

She noted that while men are predominantly identified as the main perpetrators, women are "appearing as traffickers themselves or as very significant players within the human-trafficking syndicate or organisation".

"They assist with the recruitment and so on. They assist with the orientation as to what the new recruits must do if they are going to have this business operate and bring in the profit. So, we see that women are really using their nurturing side for a not-so-good purpose," she said.

Gordon Harrison was delivering the 22nd Annual George Liele Lecture, held recently at the Mamby Park Baptist Church in Kingston.

Described as a form of modern-day slavery, human trafficking is a serious crime that involves exploiting people for profit through the use of force, fraud, or coercion. It is considered a violation of human rights and affects millions of men, women, and children globally, including within their own countries.

Information from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicates that, globally, about 40 per cent of people convicted for human trafficking are women, which is a much higher rate of female participation than in most other forms of organised crime.

They are involved in ownership,



management, recruitment, housing and monitoring victims, collecting money, and forging travel documents.

While women and girls remain the majority of victims, particularly in sexual exploitation, traffickers often use women for recruitment because they are perceived as more trustworthy.

Gordon Harrison, in highlighting the scourge of human trafficking, said it is the largest growing form of organised crime in the world, with illegal activities amounting to approximately US\$150 billion.

She noted that in addition to violating laws, human trafficking dehumanises its victims.

"It is also a gross and egregious human rights violation that strips the individual, who becomes a victim, of his or her individuality, sense of dignity, sense of worth, and their own direction in terms of how they wish to live their lives," she pointed

out.

Gordon Harrison said that locally, there is a "very strong preventive push" against trafficking in persons, with laws in place to punish perpetrators, protect victims, and take the profit out of the crime.

She noted that there are also public education campaigns targeted at schools and vulnerable populations to raise awareness and prevent persons from falling prey to traffickers.

She informed that there have been 17 convictions associated with human trafficking and "more and more, there are persons who are calling the attention of the authorities to suspected cases so that the checks can be made and a determination can be made if the matter needs to be prosecuted".

"So, culture shift takes time and we have to keep going, because if you save even one potential victim, that is one less," Gordon Harrison said. (Jamaica Gleaner)



## Venezuela's vice president demands US free Maduro and calls him country's rightful leader

Vice President of Venezuela Delcy Rodríguez said on Saturday that Nicolás Maduro remains the leader of the country and called for the United States to free him.

In a televised address to the nation that lasted less than 15 minutes, Rodríguez left open the door for dialogue with the US while also seeking to calm ruling party supporters.

“Here, we have a government with clarity, and I repeat and repeat again ... we are willing to have respectful relations,” she said, referring to the Trump administration.

“It is the only thing we will accept for a type of relationship after having attacked (Venezuela).”

Under Venezuelan law, Rodríguez would take over from Maduro.

There was no confirmation that had happened, though she did issue a statement demanding proof of life for Maduro and his wife.

Maduro and his wife, seized overnight from their home on a military base, were aboard a US warship on their way to New York to face prosecution for a Justice Department indictment accusing them of participating in a narco-terrorism conspiracy.

The legal authority for the operation was not immediately clear, though the Trump administration described it — and earlier deadly strikes on boats in the Caribbean Sea — as necessary to stem the flow of dangerous drugs.

President Donald Trump also revealed his plans to exploit the leadership void to “fix” the country’s oil infrastructure and sell “large amounts” of oil to other nations.

Trump also claimed the US government would help run the country and was already doing so, though there were no immediate signs of that.

Venezuelan state TV continued to air



pro-Maduro propaganda, broadcasting live images of supporters taking to the streets in Caracas in protest. (Jamaica Gleaner)



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## After capture and removal, Venezuela's Maduro is being held at notorious Brooklyn jail



The Brooklyn jail holding Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is a facility so troubled, some judges have refused to send people there even as it has housed such famous inmates as music stars R. Kelly and Sean 'Diddy' Combs.

Opened in the early 1990s, the Metropolitan Detention Center, or MDC Brook-

lyn, currently houses about 1,300 inmates.

It's the routine landing spot for people awaiting trial in federal courts in Manhattan and Brooklyn, holding alleged gangsters and drug traffickers alongside some people accused of white collar crimes.

A throng of Venezuelan expatriates, many draped in

flags, gathered on the sidewalks outside the jail Saturday night to celebrate Maduro's capture.

The crowd cheered as the law enforcement motorcade believed to be carrying the deposed leader and his wife arrived at the jail.

Maduro is not the first president of a country to be locked up there.

Juan Orlando Hernández, the former president of Honduras, was imprisoned at MDC Brooklyn while he was on trial for trafficking hundreds of tonnes of cocaine into the US.

Convicted and sentenced to 45 years in prison, Hernández was pardoned and freed by President Donald Trump in December.

Current detainees include

the co-founder of Mexico's Sinaloa drug cartel, Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada Garcia, and Luigi Mangione, who is accused of killing the CEO of UnitedHealthcare. Past inmates have included crypto mogul Sam Bankman-Fried and longtime Jeffrey Epstein associate Ghislaine Maxwell.

Located next to a shopping mall in a waterfront industrial area and within sight of the Statue of Liberty, the jail has been described, at its worst, as a "hell on earth" and an "ongoing tragedy."

Detainees and their lawyers have long complained about rampant violence. Two prisoners were killed by other inmates in 2024, and jail workers have been charged with accepting bribes or providing contraband. (AP)

## Myanmar's military government releases more than 6,100 prisoners on independence anniversary

Myanmar's military government granted amnesty to more than 6,100 prisoners and reduced other inmates' sentences Sunday to mark the 78th anniversary of the country's independence from Britain.

It was not immediately clear whether those released include the thousands of political detainees imprisoned for opposing military rule.

The amnesty comes as the military government proceeds with a month-long, three-stage elec-

tion process that critics say is designed to add a facade of legitimacy to the status quo.

State-run MRTV television reported that Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military government, pardoned 6,134 prisoners.

A separate statement said 52 foreigners will also be released and deported from Myanmar. No comprehensive list of those freed is available.

Other prisoners received reduced sentences, except for those con-

victed of serious charges such as murder and rape or those jailed on charges under various other security acts.

The release terms warn that if the freed detainees violate the law again, they will have to serve the remainder of their original sentences in addition to any new sentence.

The prisoner releases, common on holidays and other significant occasions in Myanmar, began Sunday and are expected to take several days to complete. (AP)



## World's largest high-altitude wind energy kite takes off in N China

A major milestone in renewable energy innovation is taking shape in the vast expanses of Alxa Left banner, north China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region. The world's largest high-altitude wind energy kite, a 5,000-square-meter airborne wind energy system, has recently completed all scheduled tests and achieved stable midair recovery. This breakthrough represents a significant step toward the engineering application of high-altitude wind power technology in China.

High-altitude wind power generation captures wind energy at altitudes above 300 meters using airborne systems to convert wind into electricity. The process resembles the launch and retrieval of a massive kite. A helium balloon lifts the system to the target altitude, where the capture canopy deploys and begins a series of controlled aerial maneuvers. These movements generate tension along the main tether, which drives generators on the ground to produce electricity.

How efficient is this airborne power station?

According to Cao Lun, chief commander of the Chinese national high-altitude wind energy research and development project, the system is designed with a rated capacity of 5 megawatts. In each 20-minute operational cycle, the kite ascends from 500 to 3,000 meters and returns, generating approximately 500 kilowatt-hours of electricity. Under normal operating conditions, it could yield up to 10 million kilowatt-hours annually, equivalent to saving about 3,000 tons of standard coal.

Globally, two main technological approaches are being pursued for



**Photo shows the world's largest 5,000-square-meter high-altitude wind energy kite. (Photo/Chai Siyu)**

high-altitude wind energy: airborne generation and ground-based generation. The distinction lies in the location of the generator. Airborne systems integrate generators directly onto the flying platform, whereas ground-based systems, like the one tested in Alxa, locate the generator on the ground and use airborne devices such as kites or airships to capture wind and drive power generation through tethered cables.

While the concept is mechanically straightforward, practical implementation is highly demanding. The system must withstand wind shear, turbulence and severe weather conditions. The 5,000-square-meter canopy covers an area comparable to about a dozen standard basketball courts, making deployment extremely challenging. During operation, the ground winch reels the tether at speeds of 50 to 60 kilometers per hour.

Why pursue high-altitude wind power when conventional wind farms are already well established?

"High-altitude winds offer higher energy density, greater directional

stability, and broader geographical availability. Their theoretical reserves exceed global electricity consumption by more than 100 times," explained Huo Shaolei, senior technical expert at China Power Engineering Consulting Group Co., Ltd.

Compared to traditional onshore systems, high-altitude wind power can reduce land and steel usage by up to 90 percent and lower electricity generation costs by approximately 30 percent. Huo noted that high-altitude wind energy remains an undeveloped segment of the renewable energy sector, but as technologies advance and costs fall, its commercial prospects are highly promising.

"Our next step is to conduct tests involving multiple kite systems and initiate power generation trials by the end of next year," he added.

At present, China holds a portfolio of independent intellectual property rights for its ladder-kite, ground-based high-altitude wind energy model, securing self-reliant capabilities across the entire industrial chain. (By Ding Yiting, People's Daily)

## What we know about the Swiss ski resort fire

It was the moment New Year's revelry turned into catastrophe.

A photo shows partygoers hoisting what look like champagne bottles fitted with sparklers, yet even as they toast the occasion flames are already visible on the foam soundproofing lining the low ceiling of the bar at the up-scale Alpine ski resort.

As officials investigated the cause Friday of the blaze that killed about 40 people, they also set about the painful task of identifying the dozens of charred bodies. Emerging images and eyewitnesses, meanwhile, began to piece together the horrific scene that unfolded around 1:30 a.m. (7:30 p.m. ET Wednesday) at Le Constellation bar in Crans-Montana, Switzerland.

One video — like that photo, geolocated by NBC News to inside the venue in the early hours of New Year's Day — suggests that the panic was not immediate. Even as flames licked the rafters and debris began to drip down, some onlookers filmed on their phones while others kept dancing or talking over the music. Another person attempted to beat the flames with a white T-shirt.

Soon, it became clear this was a grave emergency. Another video shows the fire more advanced, the person filming quickly turning to run up the stairs toward the exit, urging others to hurry or get out of the way.

About 40 people were killed and another 115 injured, many of them seriously, local officials said Thursday. The Italian Foreign Ministry, citing police in Sion, Switzerland, said Friday that the death toll was in fact 47, although this has not been confirmed by Swiss authorities.

On Thursday evening, mourners had arranged hundreds of candles at a traffic circle near the venue, which had by this point been covered up in white plastic by authorities. There was an air of somber stillness, with the mostly



young crowd sharing hugs, and expressions of shock and disbelief.

Swiss President Guy Parmelin described it Thursday as “one of the worst tragedies that our country has experienced.”

Geneva University Hospitals said it was treating five people. Most patients were young, between 15 and 30 years old, said Dr. Robert Larribau, the chief physician at the hospitals' emergency department.

He told NBC News that many of them had “serious injuries” that appeared to have been caused by the twin phenomena of “backdraft” and “flashover.”

Backdraft is when new air comes into contact with a fire that has used up all the available oxygen. This can lead “to immediate fatal injuries, including severe blast trauma, extensive thermal damage, and lethal inhalation of toxic gases,” Larribau said, “and is therefore more commonly observed among non-survivors rather than among rescued victims.”

Flashover occurs when all flammable materials in an enclosed space ignite simultaneously, causing “severe, often deep, burns predominantly affecting exposed body areas such as the face, neck, and upper limbs, and is frequently associated with critical inhalation injury due to intense radiant heat and superheated gases,” he said.

“For those who survive, there will

be weeks or even months of rehabilitation, and many will suffer lifelong consequences,” he added.

Authorities said they had ruled out terrorism, saying that an explosion at the venue was caused by the fire, rather than the other way round.

They have not commented on the images of champagne bottles fitted with sparklers. Those novelty drinks have appeared in past promotional videos for the bar, served by waiting staff wearing helmets rimmed with neon lights.

Axel Clavier, 16, from Paris, told The Associated Press news agency that he saw these drinks being handed out.

The French and Italian governments have said their citizens are among those missing.

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, who was in Switzerland, said dozens of interviews had been carried out. “Using fireworks in such a small location doesn't really seem a very responsible choice,” Tajani said, adding that identifying those responsible would be up to authorities.

And the first victim was named by the Italian Golf Federation on Friday as Emanuele Galeppini, a young Italian golfer “who embodied passion and authentic values,” the federation said.

The French soccer club FC Metz said one of its youth players, Tahirys Dos Santos, 19, was among those injured and had been airlifted to hospital in Germany.

They had been partying at what Conde Nast Traveler had described as one of Europe's best ski resorts in 2025, calling the town “particularly chic.”

With views of the iconic Matterhorn mountain, it attracts both serious skiers and socialites, serving as the home of the late “James Bond” actor Roger Moore during his later years before he died in 2017. (NBC)



# Sports News

## Rai Benjamin's Homecoming Camp Lights a Fuse Under Antigua's Next Generation

By Petra Williams

When Olympic gold medallist Rai Benjamin steps onto the track at YASCO, it does something a stopwatch cannot measure. The surface is the same, the heat still sits on your shoulders, and the lanes still curve into possibility, but the air changes. For Antigua and Barbuda's young athletes, Benjamin's Christmas break return with his Hayestack training group was not just a clinic. It was a glimpse of what "world-class" looks like up close, in real time, without a TV screen buffering the dream.

Held on December 29, 2025, at the YASCO Sports Complex, the one-day camp drew close to 100 budding athletes and nearly 20 coaches, making it one of the most concentrated athlete-development moments on the local calendar. And crucially, it was not a photo-op masquerading as sport. It was instruction, repetition, correction, and encouragement from people who make a living in the margins of elite performance.

From "Watch Me" to "Try This"

The sessions were akin to a real high-performance environment: athletes began with a meet-and-greet and warm-up, then rotated through circuits that touched the building blocks of speed and technique: plyometrics, block starts, long jump drills, hurdle work, relay exchanges..... The kind of fundamentals that, done properly, become a young athlete's quiet advantage months later at Inter-Schools, CARIFTA trials, or National Championships.

The significance is simple: Antigua has talent, but talent without exposure can become talent without direction.



Camps like this pull young athletes out of "guess-and-run" mode and into learning how to train, how to listen to their bodies, how to execute under guidance, and how to treat sport as craft.

Frank Talk on Real Challenges

Benjamin used the moment to speak plainly about what local athletics

needs to level up: infrastructure that matches ambition.

"I would love to see a stadium out here at some point... it would be nice to have a facility out here that's up to par with what the rest of the Caribbean countries have," he said, pointing to the way improved amenities can lift both athletes and coaches. "It not only drives motivation with the younger

athletes, but it drives the coaches to be better... [and] the country would rise in the athletic standings in the world.”

That’s not idle commentary. It is an elite athlete describing the ecosystem effect: better space leads to better training habits; better habits produce better performance; better performance fuels participation and national belief.

Why This Hit Young Athletes Differently

In speaking to the media, Benjamin’s presence carries extra weight because it reads as both global and personal. In Antigua Observer’s coverage, he reflected on how formative his early years on the island were to his interest in track and why returning to share knowledge matters. “Having the ability to come and give back... is super important to me,” he said.

For a youth athlete, that lands in a very particular place: if someone who has been to the very top still remembers their early track days, then those early track days were not small. They are a beginning.

Benjamin also stressed that the camp wasn’t about numbers, but about athletes leaving “more informed than when they arrived,” and learning what a professional programme feels like, on the track and in daily life. That “daily life” line matters. Discipline is portable. So is confidence.

A Rare Coaching Classroom

This was also a coaches’ clinic in disguise, with Olympic champion and renowned coach Joanna Hayes leading the group, and local standouts such as Cejhae Greene and Joella Lloyd involved in delivery.

For Antigua’s coaching community, the value is not simply hearing what elite athletes do, but seeing how elite systems teach: the cues, the corrections, the sequencing, the standards.



That knowledge does not evaporate when the visitors fly out. If applied consistently, it becomes institutional memory inside the local athletics community.

Antigua and Barbuda Athletics Association President Shorna Joseph called the experience “great” for the country, highlighting the impact of Olympians engaging directly with young athletes and the personal nature of Benjamin’s mentoring while on island.

The Motivation Multiplier

At the end of the clinic, participants received athletic gear provided by the Olympians. It’s a nice touch, yes, but it’s also something deeper: a symbolic transfer from “I met them” to “I was invested in.” For many young athletes, that small bag of gear becomes a physical reminder that they were seen.

And it’s hard to overstate the impact of “being seen” in youth sport.

Bigger Than Sport: Sports Tourism With Substance

The camp also sits neatly inside Antigua and Barbuda’s sports tourism strategy: using elite training visits to promote the destination while build-

ing local capacity. Tourism Minister Charles Fernandez described the approach as a way to “inspire our youth, elevate our international profile, and showcase the destination as an ideal environment for elite training.”

That’s the best version of sports tourism: not just athletes posting beach sunsets, but athletes leaving something behind in the community that hosted them.

What Comes Next

The opportunity now is consistency: periodic camps, stronger local competition structures, and a deliberate push to improve the YASCO environment so that young athletes can practice excellence in a setting that supports it.

Because a single day’s attendance won’t measure the real legacy of Rai Benjamin’s visit. The legacy will show up later, in cleaner hurdle form, in sharper relay exchanges, in athletes who stay in the sport one more year, and in coaches who tweak one drill that changes a season.

That is how sport grows: one spark, then a discipline, then a culture.

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## ABAA starts new season with first development meet this weekend

The Antigua and Barbuda Athletics Association (ABAA) will begin its new track and field season on Saturday.

The ABAA will commence its 2026 season with the staging of its first of a series of development meets at the YASCO Sports Complex at 3 pm.

It will be the first opportunity for local athletes to attain the qualifying standards for various regional and international meets during the year.

Last month, the ABAA announced Kasiya Daley as the nation's first qualifier for the 2026 CARIFTA Games to be held in Grenada.

Daley, the 2023 NACAC Under-18 double gold medalist and 2024 Junior Sportsman of the Year, achieved the feat during his first indoor meet at the Washburn Alumni Invite on December



6.

Representing Allen Community College in Kansas, Kasiya Daley qualified in the men's 200-meter event by clocking a time of 21.54 seconds, within the 21.75-second indoor standard.

Earlier, Daley also debuted with a 60-meter time of 6.82 seconds, also within the qualification standards for the 100 meters (6.85).

The ABAA expressed congratulations to Daley on being the first qualifier for team Antigua and Barbuda for the 2026 CARIFTA Track and Field Games, which will be held in Grenada from April 4 to 6.

The ABAA's 2026 season will continue on Sunday, January 11, with a one-mile road race, which will start at the YASCO Sports Complex at 4 pm.



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## West Indies under-19s aim high at upcoming youth world cup

With just days to go before the ICC Under-19 World Cup in Zimbabwe and Namibia, West Indies head coach Rohan Nurse believes his squad is as prepared as circumstances have allowed for the tournament that will take place from January 15 to February 6.

He pointed to a revised preparation model, strong recent performances, and growing maturity within the group as key reasons for optimism.

Nurse also noted that the regional side is determined to go at least one step further than their previous Under-19 World Cup campaign, where they finished fifth and narrowly missed out on the semi-finals.

Nurse said the minimum target this time around is a top-four finish by getting out of the group and super six stages and qualifying for the semi-finals.

The West Indies coach said preparation was shaped by the financial realities of Cricket West Indies. Nurse revealed that the team adopted a slightly different model this cycle, where the majority of preparation work was done in the local territories with the pathway coaches and franchises.

The result of that work was seen in the West Indies Under-19s' 5-2 Youth One-Day International series win over England in the Caribbean in late November.

The coach said the series against England and a 4-3 series win against Sri Lanka in Septem-



**Antiguans Micah McKenzie, left, and Jewel Andrew takes a break during a training session with the Leeward Islands Hurricanes at the Buff Up Fitness Gym in Antigua in December 2025.**

ber provided valuable exposure, which he believes has been critical to the squad's development.

Those performances have fuelled confidence within the camp, even as the team remains mindful of the significance of the upcoming tournament, which comes a decade after West Indies lifted the Under-19 World Cup in 2016.

One of the defining features of the current side, according to Nurse, is balance, both in personnel and performance.

Nurse said Antiguan Jewel Andrew, who has already tasted franchise cricket through the CPL and

Super50 competitions, and fellow Antiguan leg-spinner Micah McKenzie will bring significant experience to the West Indies team.

Andrew and McKenzie are two of the four Antiguans that comprised six players from the Leeward Islands that have been selected in the 15-member West Indies under-19 squad.

The other two Antiguans are wicketkeeper/batsmen Tanez Francis and all-rounder Matthew Miller, while Isra-el Morton of St. Maarten and Kunal Tilokani of St. Kitts are the other players from the Leewards in the squad.

## Bangladesh say they will not play T20 World Cup matches in India



Players of the Bangladesh T20 team

DHAKA (Reuters) - Bangladesh will not play their Twenty20 World Cup matches in India after Mustafizur Rahman was released by his Indian Premier League team amid growing tensions between the countries, Bangladesh's cricket board (BCB) said on Sunday.

Kolkata Knight Riders said on Saturday they had released the Bangladesh bowler after being told to do so by India's cricket board (BCCI).

Bangladesh are scheduled to play three Twenty20 World Cup matches in Kolkata next month, with the February 7 to March 8 tournament being co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka, but the BCB said they are worried about their players' safety.

"Following a thorough assessment of the prevailing situation and the growing concerns regarding the safety and security of the Bangladesh contingent

in India and considering the advice from the Bangladesh government, the Board of Directors resolved that the Bangladesh national team will not travel to India for the tournament under the current conditions," the BCB said.

"In light of this decision, the BCB has formally requested the International Cricket Council (ICC), as the event authority, to consider relocating all of Bangladesh's matches to a venue outside India."

Earlier on Sunday, Asif Nazrul, an adviser to the Ministry of Sports, said Bangladesh would not travel to India.

"We welcome this decision taken in the context of the extreme communal policy of India's cricket board," said Nazrul, who added that he had instructed the board to request Bangladesh's World Cup games be held in Sri Lanka.

Last month, hundreds protested near Bangladesh's High Commission in New Delhi after Hindu factory worker Dipu Chandra Das was beaten and set on fire in Bangladesh's Mymensingh district by a crowd that accused him of making derogatory remarks about Prophet Muhammad.

A total of 12 people were arrested in connection with his death. The incident worsened relations between India and its neighbour, with ties already strained after Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled to New Delhi following protests against her.

After Mustafizur's release on Saturday, the BCB had held an emergency meeting before writing to the ICC to relocate their matches.

"The board said that where a Bangladesh cricketer can't play in India despite being contracted, the entire Bangladesh cricket team can't feel safe to go to the World Cup," Nazrul had said.

Last year, the ICC allowed India to play Champions Trophy matches in the United Arab Emirates due to soured relations with hosts Pakistan.

On Sunday, cricket news site Cricbuzz reported that the BCB would ask the BCCI for a formal explanation regarding Mustafizur's release. The ICC did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

Bangladesh are due to play the West Indies, England, and Italy in Kolkata before ending the group stage against Nepal in Mumbai.



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## Rashid Khan to lead Afghanistan at T20 World Cup



**Rashid Khan**

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Rashid Khan was named Afghanistan's captain of a 15-man squad for the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka.

Left-arm fast bowler Fazalhaq Farooqi and all-rounder Gulbadin Naib were included after both were left out of the white-ball tour of Bangladesh in October.

Pace bowler Naveen-ul-Haq, who played his last T20 against Zimbabwe in Dec. 2024, also returns after recovering from a shoulder injury which forced him to miss the Asia Cup in September.

Mystery spinner A.M. Ghazanfar was named in reserve after Af-

ghanistan preferred experienced slow bowler Mujeeb Ur Rahman for the tournament that starts on February 7.

"Afghanistan had a terrific run in the previous edition of the T20 World Cup," said Naseeb Khan, the national cricket board's chief executive officer. "We cherish excellent memories from the past and hope for even better results this year in Asian conditions."

Afghanistan reached the semi-finals of the last T20 World Cup in 2024 played in the Caribbean and the US after defeating high-ranking teams New Zealand, Australia, the West Indies, and Bangladesh.

Khan's team will play a three-

match T20 series against the West Indies from January 19 to 22 as part of their build-up.

Afghanistan are in Group D along with New Zealand, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, and Canada. Afghanistan will open their campaign against New Zealand on February 8 in Chennai.

Squad: Rashid Khan (captain), Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Mohammad Ishaq, Sediqullah Atal, Darwish Rasooli, Shahidullah Kamal, Azmatullah Omarzai, Gulbadin Naib, Mohammad Nabi, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Naveen-ul-Haq, Fazalhaq Farooqi, and Abdullah Ahmadzai.



## Grenades extend unbeaten run in Premier Division



**A starting XI of the Jennings Grenades football team**

The Sandals and Inet Jennings Grenades maintained their unbeaten run to move to the top of the Antigua and Barbuda Football Association's (ABFA) Premier Division League on Saturday.

The Jennings Grenades notched up their eighth win in 10 matches by snatching a one-nil victory against Garden Stars FC in the last game of a triple-header at the ABFA Technical Center.

Following a goalless first half, Troy Jules broke the deadlock when he struck the winner for Grenades with a strike in the 54th minute.

The result allows the Jennings Grenades to move a point above the leaders

and back-to-back defending champions, All Saints United, at the top of the standings.

The Jennings Grenades advanced to 26 points, one ahead of All Saints United, who also have a game in hand. The Garden Stars remain on 12 points after losing for the third time in nine matches.

After suffering a narrow 2-1 loss to the Jennings Grenades in their previous outing, the Pigotts Bullets returned to winning form in the Premier Division on Saturday.

Akeem Isaac struck a hat trick as the Pigotts Bullets notched up their fifth win in

nine matches by cruising to a 3-0 victory against struggling Sir Molwyn Joseph Jennings United in Saturday's second game.

Isaac had conversions in the 19th, 38th, and 74th minutes as the Pigotts Bullets moved on to 15 points, while Jennings United remains in the cellar with three points after crashing to their ninth defeat in 10 matches.

There was also no winner in Saturday's opening match, as the Potters Tigers and Green City FC fought to a 2-2 draw.

Samuel Semper converted both goals for Green City FC. Semper struck a first-half equalizer with a

13th-minute conversion and scored in the fifth minute of added time to salvage the draw for Green City FC.

Javorn Benjamin scored both goals for the Potters Tigers with conversions in the third and 42nd minutes.

The Potters Tigers also finished the game with 10 men after Delon Moore received a red card and was expelled in the 50th minute.

The result allows the Potters Tigers to advance to 13 points after recording their fourth draw in 10 matches. Green City FC moves on to 11 points after salvaging their second draw in 10 games.