

# Construction Supplies Arrive to Expand HAPI Programme

Story on page 4



**Kuma Rodney, President of the Antigua and Barbuda Cricket Association, with four of Antigua and Barbuda's rising cricket stars who travelled to join the West Indies Under-19 squad for the ICC Men's Under-19 World Cup.**

**From left: Matthew Miller, Leeward Islands Under-19 captain; Jewel Andrew, West Indies wicketkeeper-batsman; Micah McKenzie, CWI Breakout tournament's highest wicket-taker; and Tanez Francis, Leeward Islands Under-17 captain.**

# Editorial

## The Strength Is in the Small Stories



by **Petra Williams**

If this week's local features share a common thread, it is this: nation-building is happening in the margins, not in the spotlight.

There were no dramatic announcements or sweeping declarations in many of the stories carried. Instead, there was movement. Quiet, incremental, and deliberate. A parent relieved by the reimbursement of CXC exam fees. Construction supplies arriving for families with immediate, practical needs. Books placed directly in classrooms to teach children how money works before life teaches harsher lessons. Carnival registration opening early, signalling preparation rather than a scramble.

Even sport told the same story.

In the ABFA First Division, Freemans Village Scorpions did not storm to the top with spectacle. They edged there. One goal. One match. One disciplined performance at a time. Seven wins in eight outings is not noise; it is consistency. Five Islands FC's rise, Bolans grinding out points, and even the postponed Second Division fixture all speak to a domestic football

structure being shaped week by week, not overnight. Development rarely announces itself. It accumulates.

Education remains the clearest through-line. After-school support for Grade 6 students, exam fee relief, and financial literacy books delivered to primary schools. These are not abstract investments. They ease household pressure, widen access, and create breathing room for families already stretched by rising costs. When students can focus on learning rather than fees, the return is measured not just in passes but in confidence.

Community development shows up the same way. Construction materials arriving through social programs are not symbolic gestures. They are interventions that meet people where they are. Constituency work that prioritizes presence over performance may never trend, but it anchors trust.


Culture, too, reflects intent. Carnival registration opening early is not

merely administrative housekeeping. It acknowledges that the creative economy requires planning, lead time, and respect for the labour behind the spectacle. Mas bands, musicians, vendors, and organizers are invited into the process early, which is how culture shifts from celebration to industry.


Across all these stories, the pattern is unmistakable. This is a season for groundwork.

Progress, in this moment, is not loud. It does not demand applause. It is built through after-school sessions, single goals, delivered supplies, early registration forms, and a steady presence. These are the things that hold a country together when conditions are tight.

And perhaps that is the most telling signal of all: when the small stories begin to align, they point to a nation quietly adjusting its footing and choosing to build from the ground up.


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## IN BRIEF

### TRAVEL

Antigua and Barbuda is among 13 countries included in an expanded Canadian policy that widens visa-free travel eligibility and visitor visa options, a move aimed at easing entry for qualifying travellers and strengthening people-to-people links with Canada.



### SPORTS

Antigua Girls' High School (AGHS) and Antigua Grammar School (AGS) advanced to the Under-16 finals of the Cool and Smooth Joma Caribbean Schools Football Tournament after semifinal wins. AGHS defeated Ottos Comprehensive School 5-0 in the girls' category, while AGS beat Sir Novelle Richards Academy 2-0 in the boys'. The U-16 finals will be played on Wednesday, 14 January at the Sir Vivian Richards Cricket Stadium, with AGHS facing Princess Margaret School at 4:00 pm and AGS meeting Princess Margaret School at 5:30 pm.

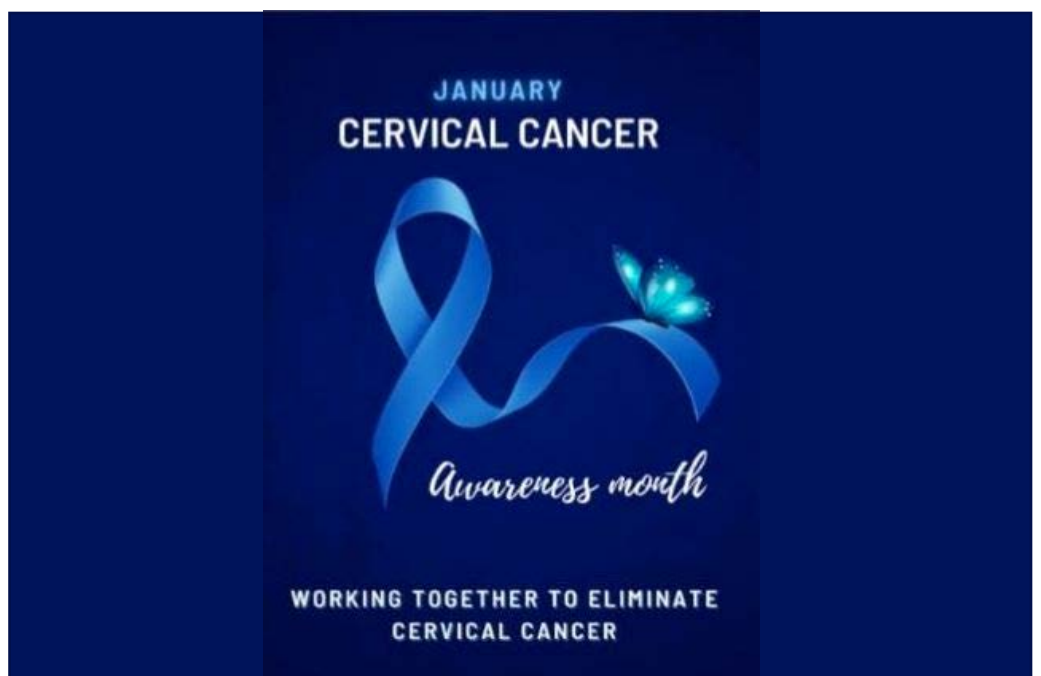


### TOURISM

Antigua and Barbuda has set a new cruise tourism record, welcoming more than 17,000 cruise passengers in a single day, highlighting the continued growth of the sector during the peak cruise season.

### HEALTH

Local health officials have joined global health agencies in calling for a more urgent scale-up in vaccination, screening, and treatment efforts to eliminate cervical cancer, with emphasis on early detection, HPV vaccination, and equitable access to care.





## Construction Supplies Arrive to Expand HAPI Programme



Construction materials valued at more than one million dollars have arrived in Antigua and Barbuda and are set to support households in need under the Government's Home Advancement Programme for the Indigent (HAPI).

The shipment, which includes sand, cement, lumber, and other essential building supplies, was cleared from the cargo port earlier this week and transported by truck to a secure holding area, as preparations continue for phased distribution.

Prime Minister Hon Gaston Browne and Minister for Social and Urban Transformation Hon Rawdon Turner said the arrival of the materials represents a significant boost to the Government's efforts to assist vulnerable citizens through the HAPI initiative.

HAPI is designed to help low-income households undertake urgent home repairs by providing building materials at no cost. Minister Turner explained that persons seeking assistance must apply through the Social Protection Board, where assessments will be conducted to determine eligibility.

According to the Minister, the programme forms part of a broader social development strategy aimed at improving housing conditions, enhancing safety, and uplifting families facing economic hardship.

While an official rollout schedule has not yet been announced, authorities say the materials will be distributed in stages to ensure that as many qualifying households as possible benefit from the initiative.





## ECAB Donates Books to Promote Financial Literacy at Urlings Primary

The Eastern Caribbean Amalgamated Bank (ECAB) has donated more than 70 books to **Urlings Primary School** as part of its ongoing commitment to promoting financial literacy among young students.

The donation, made on January 7, included 73 copies of *Aunty Honey's Money: Introducing Children to Money Featuring the Eastern Caribbean Currency*, a children's book written by Antiguan author S. Latoya Weste. The book introduces basic financial concepts in an engaging and age-appropriate format designed for ear-



ly learners.

ECAB's Marketing and Communications Officer, Jessica Russell, underscored the importance of introducing financial education at an early age.

"Financial literacy is incredibly important, and it's best that children are educated about it early so they can avoid financial missteps later in life," Russell said.

Grade Two teachers Rashelle Aaron-Clarke and Lashawn Wil-

liams-Francis accepted the donation on behalf of the school and expressed appreciation to ECAB for its continued support of education initiatives.

Students from kindergarten to Grade Four will receive copies of the book. The initiative provides a dual benefit by equipping young students with foundational money-management skills while also supporting local literary talent.

ECAB is a full-service commercial bank headquartered in Antigua and Barbuda, providing banking products and services to individuals and businesses locally, regionally, and internationally. The bank operates six branches across the island, making it the largest branch network in Antigua and Barbuda.

# WHY WE REMEMBER COMRADE HAROLD CARTER:

There is unanimity among all Antiguans and Barbudans on the singly important and absolutely transformative role played by the Antigua and Barbuda Trades and Labour Union (AT&LU) in modernizing our country. The Union was founded on 16 January 1939 and served as the vehicle on which the population rode to create a new Jerusalem. Its most outstanding leader was Sir Vere Cornwall Bird, who led the movement through its most troubling times—1944 to 1969.

**Harold Carter** --born 26 December 1927, died 26 December 2025, at age 98 years--joined this movement at a crucial period during one of the Trade Union's critical trials. Sugarcane covered the land during Comrade Carter's youth and it was a wealth-creating agricultural crop for centuries; growing sugarcane was the *raison d'être* for the existence of an Antigua, and many other Caribbean island-countries. Enslavement of a forcibly kidnapped population preceded an era when wages replaced unpaid work in 1834. Wages were always very low, conditions of work were barbarous, and not much changed between 1834 and 1939, including floggings, confinement, deprivation of wages, inhumane housing, poor diets and widespread illiteracy.

At age 21 years --the age of majority then-- **Harold Carter** immersed himself in the struggle to



**Prime Minister Gaston Browne and Mr. Harold Carter**

bring meaningful change to his island-in-the-sun. He joined the AT&LU and assumed a leadership role in his union Section; it was 1949. He witnessed firsthand the courage and coordinating in which the Union's leadership was engaged. Two years later, in 1951, the AT&LU would commence a pivotal struggle to

free workers from the debilitating yoke that circumscribed how much descendants of the imported African peoples could achieve in their island-country.

On 1 May 1951, the trade union called on workers to celebrate the first-ever Labour Day without the benefit of law. The An-





tigua Sugar Factory was led by British descendants who determined they would “starve the black workers into submission.” **Harold Carter** was determined to help the weak-kneed to resist the threats and other destructive actions planned by the descendants of the slave-masters; he was certain that bravery and courage were essential in order to ensure success for the AT&LU. A general strike was ordered by the AT&LU on 5 May 1951.

The overlords dispatched law enforcement to arrest the AT&LU section leaders, believing it would crush the struggle and reverse the momentum of the AT&LU. **Harold Carter** and twelve brave young men from around the country were arrested, charged with using threatening language to workers, and found

guilty by a magistrate named At-hill --whom the overlords loved. Twelve were sentenced to one month in jail and one— Comrade Kelso Frederick—was sentenced to two months’ jail time because he eluded the lawmen for days.

Comrades Harold Carter, James Drew, Wills Emanuel, Renford Payne, Steven Payne, Ervin Samuel, Jessey Silcott, Alvin Tanner, Alfred Thomas, Charles Williams, Mash-um-up Simon, Kelso Frederick and Comrade Clovell Williams (who may still be alive), by going on strike on 5 May 1951, tested the illegitimacy of those slave-like laws that kept Antigua and Barbuda in a permanent state of under-development. We owe them a debt.

These 13 brave comrades may have gone, but they all remain

alive in our memories as being among the most courageous Antiguan and Barbudans who ever lived. Like Prince Klaas and the 88 men and women who were executed in 1736/1737 for seeking freedom, these are “our living dead” for they remain in our memories and in the annals of our history, forever.

On behalf of the Government and people of Antigua and Barbuda, I express condolences to Comrade Carter’s wife, Mrs. Olga Carter, his family, his friends and the fraternity of the AT&LU and the ABLP. He will be accorded an official funeral. May his soul rest in peace and rise in paradise!

Honourable Gaston Browne MP  
 Prime Minister / Leader of the ABLP

## U.S. Expands Visa Bond Programme Affecting Antigua and Barbuda Travelers

Nationals of Antigua and Barbuda and Dominica have been added to the United States' pilot visa bond programme, which may require certain new visa applicants to post refundable bonds of up to US \$15,000 when seeking entry to the United States.

The policy takes effect on January 21, 2026, and applies to travellers applying for B-1 business visas or B-2 tourist visas. Under the programme, qualifying applicants may be required to complete an immigration bond form and post a bond of US \$5,000, US \$10,000, or US \$15,000, with the amount determined during the visa interview process.

U.S. authorities have stressed that the bond does not guarantee visa approval. If a visa is denied, the bond will be refunded. Where a visa is granted, the bond will be returned once the traveller demonstrates full compliance with visa conditions, including departing the United States before the authorised stay expires.

Under the new requirements, nationals who are bonded will also be restricted to entering and leaving the United States through three designated ports of entry, a measure intended to strengthen monitoring and compliance.

The U.S. Department of State says the bond requirement is designed to encourage adherence to immigration rules, particularly timely departure, and to reduce the financial burden on U.S. public services.

The visa bond pilot programme first began on August 20, 2025, and is scheduled to conclude in August 2026, though officials have indicated it could be extended or expanded depending on outcomes.

In addition to the bond programme, new U.S. entry restrictions came into effect on January 1, affecting several countries, including Antigua and Barbuda and Dominica. These



measures apply only to new visa applications. Existing U.S. visas remain valid and continue to be honoured under their original terms.

Antigua and Barbuda's Ambassador to the United States, Sir Ronald Sanders, sought to address public concern, noting that the bond requirement does not apply to holders of current U.S. visas.

He explained that U.S. authorities have linked the policy to compliance issues, particularly overstays. Sanders cautioned that "the conduct of a few can affect the many," pointing to instances where a small number of nationals overstayed or incurred costs on the U.S. public purse, including unpaid hospital bills.

"The visa bond is intended to encourage compliance with immigration rules, including timely departure," Sanders said, adding that existing visa holders should not be alarmed, as their visas remain valid on current terms.

The inclusion of Antigua and Barbuda and Dominica has sparked widespread questions locally about who will be affected and whether the measure represents a broader shift in U.S.–Caribbean travel relations. Regional observers note that while the policy targets a limited category of applicants, the financial thresholds involved could place additional barriers on legitimate travel for business, tourism, and family visits.

### U.S. Visa Bond Requirement — At a Glance

#### Who is affected?

Some travellers from Antigua and Barbuda applying for B-1 (business) or B-2 (tourist) visas.

#### What is it?

A refundable visa bond that may be required by a U.S. consular officer.

#### Bond amount:

US \$5,000 to US \$15,000

#### Does it guarantee a visa?

No. A bond does not ensure visa approval.

#### Refund:

Returned if the visa is denied or once the traveller **leaves the U.S. on time.**

#### Effective date:

January 21, 2026 (per the U.S. State Department)

#### Caribbean countries included:

Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica





**TASHA COBBS LEONARD**

**NAOMI RAINE - SAMUEL MEDAS - JOHNMARK WIGGAN**

**RASHID WALKER - MINISTER BEVERLEY DANVERS - ROXY - RICHIE PELLE**

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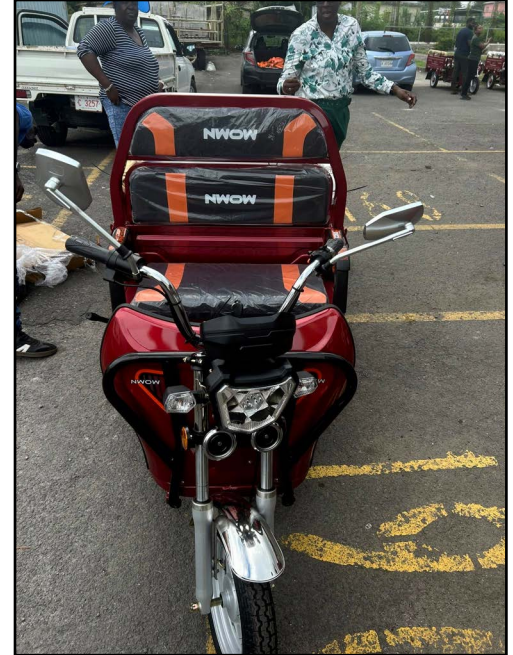
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ANTIGUA CARNIVAL



# Agriculture Ministry Distributes E-Bikes to Strengthen Field Operations



The Ministry of Agriculture has taken another step toward improving efficiency and sustainability in the agricultural sector by distributing electronic bicycles to key agencies and out-stations.

The distribution took place between Monday, January 5, and Tuesday, January 6, as part of the Ministry's ongoing efforts to enhance mobility and operational effectiveness across agricultural services.

Among the recipients were the Antigua and Barbuda Defence Force and the Antigua and Barbuda College of Advanced Studies, where the bicycles will support activities at the recently established School of Agriculture at the former Glanvilles Secondary School location. Several Ministry out-stations also received e-bikes, including the newly opened Crop Research and Development Station in Bethesda.

According to the Ministry, the bi-



cycles will assist agricultural officers, farmers, and station staff with routine field inspections, crop and livestock monitoring, and other daily operations, particularly within farms and research stations.

Recipients welcomed the initiative, noting that the e-bikes will make it easier to transport produce, animal feed, and light equipment, while reducing reliance on fuel-powered vehicles and lowering operational costs.

The Ministry said the programme

reflects its commitment to innovative and environmentally friendly solutions aimed at strengthening service delivery, boosting productivity, and supporting national development within the agricultural sector.

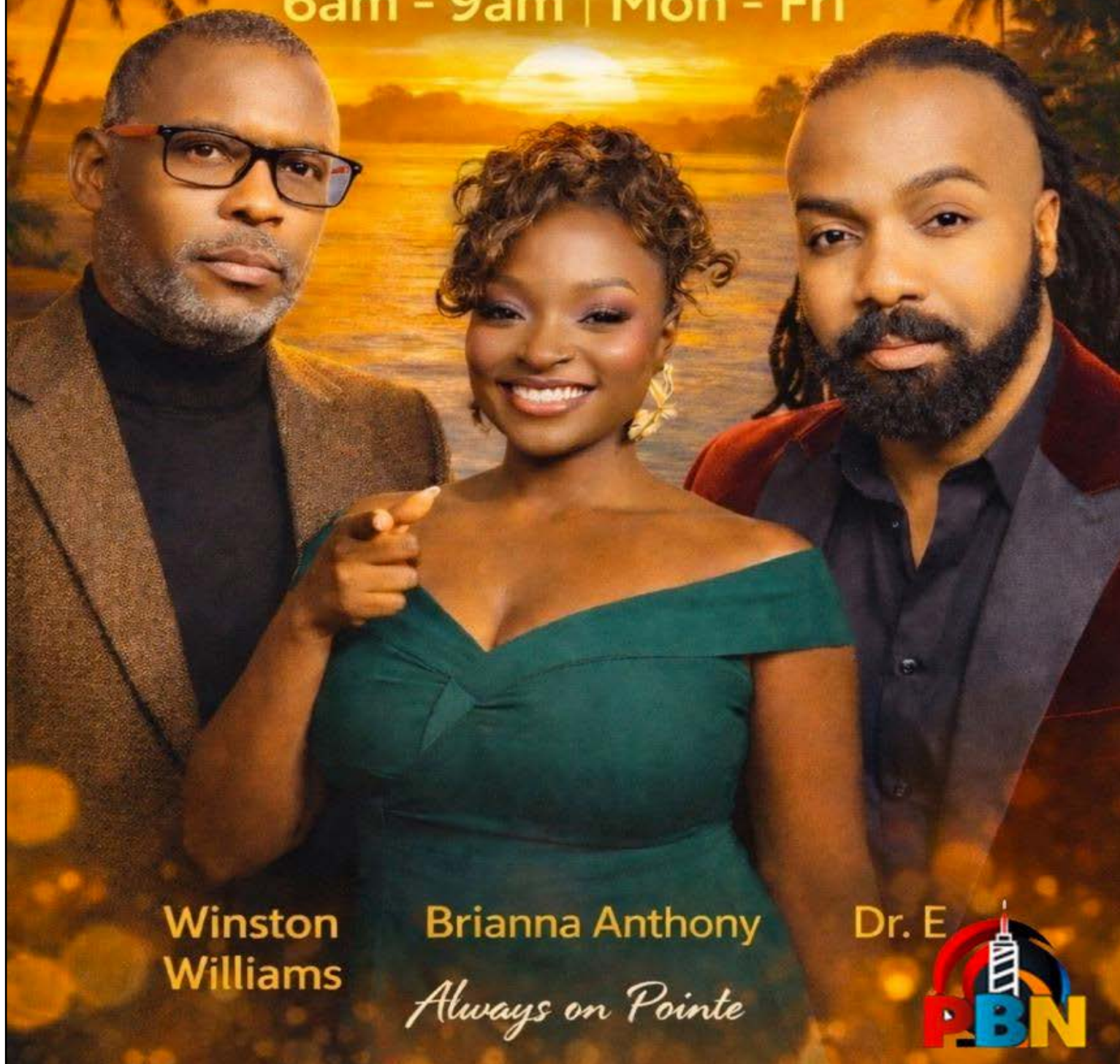
The electric bicycles were donated by the People's Government of Hainan Province through the Chinese Embassy, underscoring ongoing cooperation between Antigua and Barbuda and China on sustainable development initiatives.



# The MORNING P<sub>ointe</sub> Show

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## Parent Praises Government's CXC Exam Fee Reimbursement Initiative



A parent has welcomed the Government's decision to reimburse Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) examination fees, describing the move as a significant relief for families already

facing rising living costs.

Speaking with **PBN News**, Seetha Wilson said she was elated when she learned that parents who had already paid CXC examination fees would be refunded.

Wilson explained that the reimbursement has eased financial pressure in her household, particularly as families continue to contend with increasing costs for school supplies, utilities, and everyday expenses. She noted that CXC examination fees can be especially burdensome for parents with more than one child preparing for regional examinations.

According to Wilson, the initiative reflects a strong commitment to education and ensures that no student is placed at a disadvantage because of financial constraints.

She also praised the execution of the reimbursement process, telling **PBN News** that communication through the school system was clear and that the refund was handled efficiently.

The Government recently announced that it will assume responsibility for covering CXC examination fees going forward, a policy aimed at expanding access to education and easing the financial burden on families.

Wilson said the initiative has provided reassurance to parents and allows students to focus on their studies without the added stress of exam-related costs. She is among many parents expressing support for the measure, which Government officials say forms part of a broader strategy to support families and invest in national development.



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**Antigua and Barbuda has formally welcomed Cecil Chinene-re as Zimbabwe's newly appointed ambassador, marking further strengthening of diplomatic relations between the two countries.**



**Ambassador Chinene-re presented his credentials to Sir Clare Roberts**

Antigua and Barbuda has formally welcomed Cecil Chinene-re as Zimbabwe's newly appointed ambassador, marking further strengthening of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

According to state media, Ambassador Chinene-re presented his credentials to Sir Clare Roberts at a ceremony on Tuesday. The presentation was followed by courtesy calls and discussions with senior government officials.

Ambassador Chinene-re held discussions with Prime Minister Honorable Gaston Browne, during which both sides reaffirmed their commit-

ment to strengthening bilateral relations and cooperation on regional and international issues.

Subsequently, the ambassador met with Foreign Affairs Minister Hon E. P. Chet Greene, and the talks focused on expanding practical co-operation between the two countries. Areas identified for potential agreements included agriculture, health, technology, and information sharing, with officials indicating that some initiatives could be advanced later this year.

During the engagements, Ambassador Chinene-re also informed Antigua and Barbuda's leadership that Zimbabwe has nominated a candidate



**Ambassador Chinene-re held discussions with Prime Minister Honorable Gaston Browne**



**the ambassador met with Foreign Affairs Minister Hon E. P. Chet Greene**

for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for the 2027–2028 term and requested Antigua and Barbuda's consideration. The matter is expected to be referred to the Cabinet for review.

Additionally, the ambassador appealed to Antigua and Barbuda for

support in advocating for the removal of unilateral economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe. State media reported that Prime Minister Browne and Minister Greene both expressed a willingness to raise the issue on Zimbabwe's behalf at the international level.



# Carnival 2026 Registration Now Open

The Antigua and Barbuda Festivals Commission has officially opened registration for Antigua Carnival 2026, as preparations begin for the country's premier cultural festival, scheduled for July 25 to August 4, 2026.

Registration is now open for a wide range of categories, including Calypso Monarch, Party Monarch, Queen of Carnival, Junior Carnival competitions, Mas Bands, J'ouvert Bands, Road March, T-Shirt Mas, Business Floats, Vendors, and pageants such as Mr & Miss Teenage and Prince & Princess.

Completed registration forms can be delivered to the National Festivals Office at the Cecil George-John Building or to the Ministry of Creative Industries on Old Parham Road. The Commission encourages early registration as Carnival planning gains momentum.

With the theme of cultural excellence and creative expression once again center stage, Carnival 2026 promises another vibrant season of music, mas, and community pride.



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COMMISSION**

**REGISTRATION IS OPEN  
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TO  
AUG 04  
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Calypso Monarch	Monday Wear
Cheerleaders	Mr. & Miss Teenage Pageant
Individual Mas	Party Monarch
J'ouvert Bands	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.  
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Request forms via email at [info.nof@ab.gov.ag](mailto:info.nof@ab.gov.ag) or WhatsApp at (268) 727-9201. For inquiries, call (268) 462-4707.

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## Chicken Meat Heist

Approximately 150 cases of chicken meat were stolen during a break-in at Goodwill Agencies on All Saints Road.

Police say thieves cut into a 40-foot container on the company's compound and removed an entire pallet of chicken meat. The company later reported that 48 cases were found a short distance from the container.

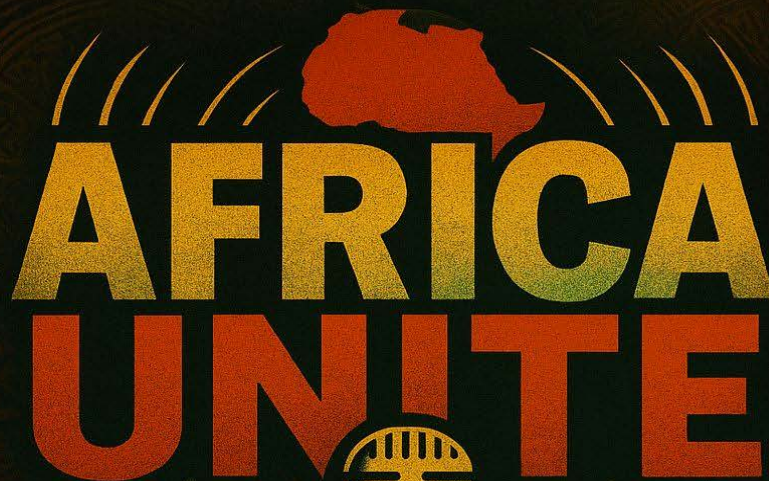
Goodwill Agencies is urging the public and business owners to exercise caution when purchasing chicken meat, warning that stolen items may have been compromised or contaminated during removal.

Police investigations into the matter are continuing. Anyone with information that may assist the police is asked



to contact the Criminal Investigations

Department at 462-3913 or 462-3914, or Crime Stoppers at 800-TIPS (8477)



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## Michael Joseph: People First, Progress Always in St. John's Rural West



For Michael Joseph, 2025 was not a year of grandstanding. It was a year of presence. Of showing up, listening carefully, and quietly putting systems in place that make everyday life a little stronger for families in St. John's Rural West.

As the caretaker for the constituency under the banner of the Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party, Joseph's work over the past year has centered on a simple yet demanding principle: people first. From education and youth development to health, community safety, sports, and grassroots cultural activities, his approach has been steady engagement rather than spectacle.

Among the initiatives he identifies as most meaningful in 2025 is the after-school Maths and English support

program for Grade 6 students, a project designed to strengthen foundational skills at a critical transition point in students' academic journeys. For many families, the program provided structured support that might otherwise have been out of reach, easing pressure on parents and giving students added confidence ahead of national examinations.

Joseph has repeatedly stressed that education is not just a policy area but a long-term investment in national resilience. By focusing on targeted community-level interventions, he views education support as both a social policy and an economic strategy.

Beyond the classroom, 2025 saw continued engagement with community groups,

seniors, parents, and volunteers across the constituency. Health outreach, youth and sports initiatives, and responsiveness to everyday community concerns formed part of what Joseph describes as the "unseen work" of representation. Progress, he notes, does not always arrive with fanfare, but with consistency and care.

In reflecting on the year, Joseph has publicly expressed gratitude to teachers, healthcare workers, community leaders, volunteers, and young people whose efforts continue to shape Rural

West. Their voices, he says, have helped guide both priorities and partnerships.

Looking ahead to 2026, cultural development remains firmly on the agenda. One of the most visible upcoming initiatives in the first quarter of the year under Joseph's patronage is the Miss St. John's Rural West Pageant, scheduled for Saturday, 7 February 2026 at the Multipurpose Cultural Centre.

Branded "*Rekindled: The Flame of Grace Returns*," the pageant goes beyond spectacle. It is positioned as a platform for confidence-building,



# Feature

personal development, and positive representation for young women within the constituency. With Joseph's support and funding, the event reflects a broader belief that culture and youth empowerment are essential components of community strength.

The winner will likely serve as the Constituency's delegate in the Labour Queen pageant, which is part of the annual Labour Day activities.

As the new year approaches, Joseph says his focus remains on practical solutions, stronger partnerships, and expanded opportunities, especially for young people. His outlook for 2026 is one of continuity rather than departure: deepening what works, refining what can be improved, and maintaining respect for the communities he serves.

For St. John's Rural West, the story of 2025 has been less about headlines and more about groundwork. As 2026 unfolds, Michael Joseph appears intent on maintaining that same rhythm: measured, people-centered, and firmly rooted in the belief that lasting progress is built one household, one classroom, and one community at a time.





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## What Venezuela's Shock Means for the Caribbean and the Global South

By Petra Williams

Venezuela has entered the most dangerous and revealing moment of its modern history. The removal of President Nicolás Maduro by U.S. forces has not produced democracy but a vacuum in which oil, power, and foreign control are being renegotiated in real time. As Washington moves to administer Venezuela's energy assets and oversee its political transition, the Caribbean and the wider Global South are forced to confront a familiar question in a new century: who decides the future of a sovereign people when great powers deem their government inconvenient?

Trump's logic in Venezuela is not democratic. It is transactional. President Trump has not framed the intervention as a mission to restore democracy or protect Venezuelan voters. Instead, he has framed it as stopping drugs, crushing gangs, and securing energy and economic interests. When

he says U.S. troops will remain in Venezuela to "protect American oil interests while billions of dollars are made," he is not speaking in diplomatic code. He is stating plainly that this is a resource-security operation. This doctrine is fundamentally different from Biden's framing of Ukraine or Obama's rhetoric about democracy. It is raw geopolitical capitalism.

That is why, for now, Delcy Rodríguez is not only compatible with Trump's plans but central to them. Based on widely available public and diplomatic reporting, she is regarded as one of the most powerful figures within the Venezuelan state, serving as vice president, chief negotiator in international talks, and a key manager of economic and security coordination. Though she speaks in anti-U.S. terms, in practice she has spent years overseeing PDVSA, oil exports, foreign-currency flows, and navigating sanctions mechanisms, giving her a rare command of

how Venezuela's oil economy actually functions in the real world of multinational firms, finance, and enforcement.

Importantly, Rodríguez sits at the intersection of civil government and hard power. She can order PDVSA to keep pumping, tell ports and customs to keep operating, communicate with generals, manage foreign reserves, and control the bureaucratic arteries that feed the state. In a collapsing system, she is the switchboard. Without her cooperation, Venezuela will stop functioning within days. That is what the United States needs first: order, not elections.

Maduro is declared "illegitimate" because parts of the world do not recognise his elections. Yet the proposed remedy is not a Venezuelan vote but a foreign takeover of Venezuela's government and oil industry. No ballots. No transition supervised by Venezuelans. No mandate from the people. Just force. President Trump has been



# Feature

explicit that Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, and he will oversee Venezuela's administration and decide who is permitted to run the country. He has already ruled out María Corina Machado, the opposition's most popular figure, saying she is not "respected or supported." Even the opposition, in this framework, must pass through Washington's filter.

It is also essential to be precise about what legitimacy means at this moment. María Corina Machado commands significant popular support and represents a powerful democratic aspiration inside Venezuela. But she has not held executive office or controlled state institutions. In the current phase of crisis, where violence, logistics, and economic continuity dominate, her role is political rather than operational. She may represent voter sentiment, but not yet institutional authority.

It is necessary to state this clearly. María Corina Machado, while a dominant popular figure in Venezuela's

opposition movement, has never been elected to executive office through a national democratic process. In this phase of crisis, legitimacy at the ballot box is being subordinated to control over the instruments of the state.

In this second phase of the Trump administration's intervention, it is clear that it is not democracy; it is risk management – minimising disruptions. That means negotiating with those who control weapons and logistics, not those who won votes. Delcy fits that role. María Corina Machado, at best, is postponed until it is safe to talk about elections, assuming elections are still allowed to take place at all.

That leaves the moral contradiction at the heart of this moment. A twice-elected president is removed in the name of democracy. An unelected foreign triumvirate then claims the right to run a sovereign state. Oil is secured. Troops are deployed. And only later, perhaps, are the people consulted.

Post-colonial societies are being asked to applaud this because it is happen-

ing to a government we dislike. We are being invited to endorse the very playbook that shattered our ancestors, convinced that this time it is righteous and that this time, mayhaps, it will not circle back to us.

What is unfolding in Venezuela is not just a Venezuelan story. It is a warning shot to the Caribbean and the wider Global South about how power is wielded when resources, geopolitics, and great-power rivalry collide. Today, it is Venezuela's oil and its elected government that are being overridden by foreign force and foreign administrators. Tomorrow, it could be any small state whose politics or assets fall out of alignment with a major power's interests. For post-colonial societies, the lesson is as old as history and as urgent as the present: sovereignty is never guaranteed by rhetoric, only by the ability to defend, define, and refuse to surrender it.

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**THE RUSH HOUR SHOW** 5PM-7PM MON. - FRI.  
WITH ROGER LAKE 6AM-9AM SATURDAYS

**TOUCHLINE** 7PM-9PM MON. - THURS.  
WITH EPILUS

**BAD COMPANY** 2PM-6PM THURS. 12PM-4PM SATURDAYS  
LIVE FROM THE V.I. & 1PM-5PM ON SUNDAYS

**REGGAE INSPIRATION** 9PM-12AM MON. THURS. SUNDAY  
WITH SELECTOR KEEGAN

**JAH WADADLI** 7PM-9PM FRIDAYS  
WITH DJ JAH WADADLI





**MASICKA - CAPLETON - BURNING FLAMES**  
**TIAN WINTER - CLAUDETTE PETERS - MR VEGAS - CHRISTOPHER MARTIN**  
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- CENOTAPH TO THE ROUNDAABOUT
- CORONATION ROAD
- OLD PARHAM RD. GRAMMAR SCHOOL WESTWARD TO THE ROUNDAABOUT

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# A new chapter at the start of 2026: China's Africa diplomacy looks to the people



At the start of a new year, China's top diplomat once again heads to Africa for his first overseas visit. Member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi will visit Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania and Lesotho, and attend the China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges launch ceremony at the African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa.

This itinerary follows a tradition that has lasted more than three decades. Since 1991, China's foreign minister has chosen Africa as the destination of his first trip each year, a diplomatic practice widely seen as a clear signal of priority and continuity in China's foreign policy. Against the backdrop of global uncertainty and uneven recovery, this year's visit carries an additional message: China-Africa cooperation is not only about projects and trade, but increasingly about people, shared development paths and long-term trust.

Ethiopia, home to the headquarters of the AU, has long been a focal point of China-Africa diplomacy. Over the years, cooperation between China and Ethiopia has expanded from traditional infrastructure to industrial capacity, trade facilitation and development planning. China has remained one of Ethiopia's major trading partners and sources of investment, while large-scale projects supported by Chinese enterprises have helped improve connectivity and industrial foundations.

More importantly, Addis Ababa now serves as a political and diplomatic hub for the continent. Holding the China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges launch ceremony at the AU headquarters underscores China's intention to engage Africa as a whole, not just bilaterally. It reflects Beijing's view that China-Africa relations have entered a stage where multilateral coordination, shared agendas and people-centered cooperation matter more than ever.

The remaining stops on Wang Yi's tour – Somalia, Tanzania and Lesotho – reflect the diversity of China-Africa relations.

In Somalia, China has consistently supported peace, stability and reconstruction, emphasizing respect for sovereignty and independent development. As Somalia continues its efforts to rebuild institutions and restore livelihoods, China has expressed will-

ingness to contribute through development cooperation, humanitarian assistance and capacity building, within the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

Tanzania represents one of China's longest-standing partnerships in Africa. Over decades, the two sides have built cooperation across infrastructure, trade and investment, and Tanzania has remained a key partner in East Africa. Chinese investment projects there have contributed to local industrialization and employment, while new areas such as green development and the digital economy are gradually emerging as fields of cooperation.

Lesotho, though smaller in size, has been an important partner in China's engagement with southern Africa. Chinese-assisted projects in infrastructure, public services and renewable energy have supported local development, while exchanges in education and training have helped nurture long-





term people-to-people ties.

Together, the four countries illustrate a core feature of China-Africa relations: cooperation adapted to local needs, stages of development and national priorities, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

The launch of the China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges marks a clear shift in emphasis. While infrastructure, trade and investment remain pillars of cooperation, both sides increasingly recognize that sustainable relations depend on mutual understanding at the societal level.

According to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Year of Exchanges will feature a wide range of activities, including youth dialogues, cultural programs, education and training initiatives, media exchanges and cooperation in public health and social development. These activities are designed to bring ordinary Chinese and Africans closer together – students, artists, researchers, local officials and community workers.

In recent years, China has expanded scholarships for African students, established vocational training programs such as Luban Workshops, and supported cooperation in fields like healthcare and poverty reduction. Data released by Chinese official sources show that tens of thousands of African students now study in China each year, while Chinese medical teams and agricultural experts continue to work across the continent. The new exchange year aims to integrate these efforts into a more systematic, visible and long-term framework.

Wang Yi's Africa tour also serves as an important follow-up to recent FOCAC outcomes, which outlined priority areas such as industrialization, agricultural modernization, digital cooperation, green development and capacity building. As China pursues high-quality development at home, it is increasingly aligning its Africa cooperation with shared modernization goals.

Chinese officials have repeatedly stressed that China does not export a development model, but is willing to

share experience and development opportunities. In this context, people-to-people exchanges are seen as a bridge: helping African partners better understand China's development path, while enabling China to learn from Africa's diversity and vitality.

The timing of the visit – at the very start of the year – also sends a message of stability. At a time when geopolitical competition and unilateralism are reshaping international relations, China continues to frame its Africa policy around partnership, respect and long-term commitment.

As Wang travels from Addis Ababa to Mogadishu, from Dar es Salaam to Maseru, the focus is not only on diplomatic meetings or signed documents, but on setting the tone for the year ahead. The China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges is designed to make cooperation more tangible to ordinary citizens on both sides, and to reinforce the social foundations of the partnership.



# Regional News

## Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit clarifies Dominica's position on allegations of regional Venezuelan trafficking network

Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit has made it clear that Dominica has never engaged in any illegal activities that contravene international law, “domestic law or any regional agreements or international treaties.”

His remarks were made in response to reports by The Trinidad Express, which revealed allegations of widespread corruption among Caribbean politicians linked to drug cartels involved in cocaine trafficking. Revelations which may cause considerable upheaval throughout the region.

The information emerged following the high-profile detention of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his spouse, Cilia Flores, during a U.S. military operation in Caracas on January 3.

A comprehensive 700-page indictment filed in New York accuses drug traffickers of bribing officials along the so-called “Caribbean route” to ensure their protection and political support.

These bribes allegedly facilitated the smooth transportation of cocaine from Venezuela heading northward toward the United States, with authorities claiming that such payments enabled certain politicians to sustain and even grow their influence, embedding drug-related corruption deeply into regional governance structures.

The indictment describes a vast and intricate trafficking network that extends from Colombian drug producers to Venezuelan transit points, Caribbean intermediaries, and finally to distributors in Central America and Mexico.

Throughout this chain, traffickers are alleged to have profited enormously while also securing political backing, thereby weakening institutional integrity and contributing to political instability across the hemisphere.

“Dominica, like many other Caribbean countries, or most Caribbean countries, entered into an agreement with



Venezuela under what we call the Petro Caribe agreement. And that agreement helped sustain the economies of all of the participating countries, including those that did not participate, because it helped bring in foreign exchange, it helped stabilize the price of petroleum products from cooking gas to gas for our fishing boats and our vehicles,” Skerrit told reporters during a press conference on Monday. “And so one cannot discount the tremendous impact of Petro Caribe on the agreement. But as far as our relationship with Petro Caribe, it was transparent.”

He continued, “We never engaged in any illegal activities, any activities that contravene international law or domestic law or any regional agreements or international treaties. So there’s nothing to be concerned about or fearful about.”

According to Skerrit, his government has a track record of transparency, “And I can say to you, without any fear of contradiction from anybody, this government has never engaged itself in any drug dealing or any illegal activities whatsoever. And we can stand and say this anywhere with a very clear face and a very sincere

heart.”

The prime minister also took the opportunity to remind reporters and the listening public about his government’s firm position on drug trafficking and illegal activities in Dominica.

“There is no government in the history of the country that has spent more money on police and national, regional security and ensuring that this country and this region remains a very peaceful place,” he stated.

He added, “There are a number of things that I have engaged myself in as Prime Minister before international partners—the regional securities concern—that I don’t even share with the cabinet because of their high sensitive nature. But I do these things because I believe it’s important for me to do so as Prime Minister to secure this country and to secure the region as a place that people can live and do business and visit in peace, without fear of security.”

President Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores both pleaded not guilty to the drug trafficking charges in a New York City court yesterday, January 5, 2026. (Dominica News Online)



## Sykes: Current system simply cannot continue Chief justice warns urgent reform key to handling 3,000-case backlog



Chief Justice Bryan Sykes has warned that Jamaica cannot “try its way out” of its growing court backlog and that reform of the jury trial system must now be seriously considered.

Speaking at King’s House on Monday during a swearing-in ceremony for judicial officers, Justice Sykes said the criminal justice system is under severe strain, with roughly 3,000 cases currently in backlog across the island.

“We cannot try our way out of the backlog that we have,” Justice Sykes said, noting that more than 1,000 of those cases are lodged at the Home Circuit Court in downtown Kingston, with the remainder scattered across other courts.

He pointed to the volume and increasing complexity of cases as evidence that the current system is no longer sustainable. He reiterated his long-held view that the circuit court system, while once effective, has “outlived its usefulness” and cannot cope with modern demands.

According to Justice Sykes, there is “no such thing as a simple case anymore” in the circuit courts as most matters now involve complex evidentiary issues that consume extensive

judicial time. Even with the most efficient judges, he said, the traditional four-week trial period is no longer sufficient.

“The current system simply cannot continue,” he cautioned.

He noted that he previously raised the issue of reform with Minister of Justice Delroy Chuck, who committed to examining the matter, but acknowledged that no concrete changes had yet been implemented. Nonetheless, the chief justice stressed that reform of the jury trial system is now unavoidable if timely justice is to be delivered.

Justice Sykes pointed to developments in England and Wales, where the government appointed retired senior judge Sir Brian Leveson to address a backlog of about 78,000 cases, a figure projected to reach 100,000 by the end of the decade if left unchecked. Among the controversial proposals being discussed there, he noted, is the curtailment of jury trials.

“The home of the jury system is now saying maybe we need to rethink the jury system,” he said, underscoring that Jamaica is not alone in grappling with the challenge of timely justice.

He also referenced the United States, where recognition that not every case can proceed to trial has led to the widespread use of plea bargaining. In the US federal system, he said, more than 97 per cent of cases are resolved without trial. Against that background, Justice Sykes urged the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions to ensure that prosecutors attend court prepared with clear, fair positions on how cases may be disposed of.

Despite the challenges, the chief justice praised the performance of several courts, particularly the parish courts, which he said continue to provide “outstanding service”. He noted that even with a reduced time standard of 20 months, the net backlog in those courts remained under three per cent despite inadequate courtrooms and the impact of Hurricane Melissa.

He also commended the Court of Appeal, which he said is delivering 56 judgments for every 10 reserved, placing it among the better-performing appellate courts in the region.

At the Supreme Court, Justice Sykes said reforms are under way to the registry system, especially the civil registry, including the introduction of a docket system that assigns judges and staff to cases from start to finish.

Looking ahead, he announced that within 12 weeks, the Court of Appeal, the High Court Division of the Gun Court in Kingston, the St Thomas Parish Court, and the Court Administration Division are expected to achieve ISO certification.

While stressing that certification does not mean perfection, he said it reflects a commitment to minimum service standards and accountability.

“That is really what is required of a modern judicial system,” he said, expressing confidence that 2026 would see a more efficient and responsive justice system. (Jamaica Gleaner)



## 4-y-o among 14 killed by cops in first days of 2026

A four-year-old child is among 14 persons shot and killed by the police in the first six days of the new year, sparking concerns from the Independent Commission of Investigations (INDECOM) regarding the number of fatal incidents, particularly those involving minors.

The latest deaths come from two incidents, one a triple fatal shooting, and the other a single fatal shooting in Manchester and Clarendon, respectively on Monday. The Manchester incident was the third triple fatal shooting, with two others occurring on January 1, in St James; and Westmoreland; and two single fatal shooting incidents in Kingston.

“The six incidents, on January 1 and 5, increases the year to date total fatal shootings for 2026 to 12 persons shot and killed by the security forces. Two of the incidents were reported as planned operations,” the release read, highlighting a longstanding controversy regarding the utilisation of body-worn cameras by officers on operations. None were worn on those police operations this year.

“Whilst every loss of life is deemed unfortunate, it is particularly disheartening when a minor is harmed. The importance of proper planning to limit the fatality of civilians is paramount. INDECOM reiterates the need for officers to be provided with body-worn cameras on planned operations,” offered Deputy Commissioner of INDECOM Yanique Taylor-Wellington.

“INDECOM notes with concern the alarming increase in fatal shootings recorded in Jamaica during 2025, and the troubling manner in which 2026 has commenced as it relates to deaths by state agents. At the end of 2025, 311 persons were shot and killed by the police, representing a 65% increase over the previous year,” she said. “That equates to an additional 122 citizens losing their lives by members of the security forces. Already in



2026, twelve persons have been shot and killed over a two day period.”

Among the minors killed this year were four-year-old Romaine Bowman and 16-year-old Kevaun Martinez, both in a fatal shooting incident in Granville, St James. Fifteen-year-old Romaine Campbell was also fatally shot in an incident in Bethel Town, Westmoreland.

In 2025, six minors were fatally shot and two were shot and injured. Of the six, two were 17; three were 16; and another was 15-years-old; while in 2024, six minors were also fatally shot and two were shot and injured. Last year, a 17-year-old and a 15-year-old were also shot and injured last year; while in 2024 two minors were shot and injured in police encounters.

Cumulatively, eight illegal weapons were recovered by the cops in six incidents, INDECOM said, adding that the shooting scenes were examined, evidential material recovered, processed and packaged and that the hands of

the deceased were swabbed for gun-powder residue. The officers involved were also served and processed, the release said.

As for the incident involving the four-year-old, the Commission reported that: “The investigation still remains in its preliminary phases of enquiry, to ascertain the circumstances resulting in the fatal shooting of three persons (of which there were two minors) and non-fatal injury of a woman. It is reported that the incident occurred from a joint police-military operation.”

“The commission is hopeful that outstanding forensic material will be able to shed more light during the investigation,” INDECOM responded to the Gleaner’s questions.

The data follows INDECOM’s report last October that one in every five police operations in which a civilian is killed, a female occupant, usually with children, is removed or barred from the ill-fated area moments before cops opened fire.

INDECOM noted the worrying trend in a Special Investigative Report on Planned Operations, in which it also cited questionable acts by the police including: tampering with CCTV footage, failure to activate body-worn cameras, improper handling of weapons and evidence, and the widespread use of flawed search warrants.

The report stated that oftentimes women and children are removed from ill-fated scenes before so-called shootouts between the security forces and the accused individuals begins.

The report noted that between January 1 and September 30 last year, 67 officers had been brought under investigation for alleged use of excessive force. Of those, 49 have been charged with murder. The trend in fatal police shootings has risen steadily over the years with 127 in 2021, 134 in 2022, 155 in 2023, and 189 in 2024. (Jamaica Gleaner)



## 32 Cuban Troops Killed as U.S. Operation in Venezuela Detains Maduro

Cuba officially confirmed that 32 of its military and police personnel were killed in the United States' military operation in Venezuela that resulted in the capture of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. The deaths were announced in a government statement over the weekend, with Havana framing the strikes as a direct act of aggression on Venezuelan soil. The Cuban government said the personnel were serving on a mission to protect Maduro at the request of Venezuelan authorities under bilateral cooperation agreements. In recognition of the losses, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel declared January 5 and 6 as days of national mourning.

Cuba's official account describes the incident as involving combat engagements and facility bombings during the U.S. strike, noting the deaths occurred either in direct fighting or as a result of bombardment. The fallen included members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior, though Havana has not shared full operational details.

On Monday, the Venezuelan government issued a statement expressing gratitude for Cuba's support, underscoring that Cuban forces were operating under formal cooperation agreements and were executing defense-related duties. Venezuelan Defence Minister General Vladimir Pa-




drino López also condemned the U.S. action, asserting that "a large part" of Maduro's security team was "killed in cold blood" during the operation.

U.S. President Donald Trump acknowledged casualties among Maduro's guards in the operation, saying "many Cubans died yesterday protecting Maduro," though U.S. officials have framed the mission as a targeted law enforcement action to apprehend Maduro under an outstanding U.S. indictment.

The U.S. operation occurred early Saturday in Caracas, involving strikes on multiple locations followed by the



detention of Maduro and Flores. Independent tallies indicate at least 55 Venezuelan and Cuban military and security personnel were killed, and reports indicate additional civilian casualties, though exact numbers remain unclear. Seven U.S. servicemembers were reported injured in the raid.

In the wake of the operation, Maduro and his wife have been transferred to New York to face federal charges in U.S. courts, where both have pleaded not guilty. Regional and global reactions continue to evolve, with several governments condemning the U.S. military action as a breach of sovereignty and international law.



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## U.S. seizes Russian-flagged oil tanker linked to Venezuela after weekslong pursuit

The United States has seized a Russian-flagged oil tanker in the Atlantic following a dramatic weekslong chase on the high seas.

The operation to seize the sanctioned vessel, which changed its name from the Bella 1 to the Marinera after fleeing the American blockade of Venezuela last month, was carried out early Wednesday. The U.S. also announced the seizure of another sanctioned tanker, the M/T Sophia, which it said was “conducting illicit activities in the Caribbean Sea.”

The Kremlin, a strong supporter of deposed President Nicolás Maduro, accused the U.S. of violating maritime law by seizing the Marinera.

The ship’s efforts to evade authorities were followed in real time by a fleet of observers and analysts, who also tracked as the U.S. moved military assets to the United Kingdom in recent days.

The saga emerged as a new flashpoint between Washington and Moscow that threatened to undermine the Trump administration’s blockade of the Latin American country in the wake of its stunning attack and capture of Maduro.

The U.S. European Command confirmed the seizure of the tanker for violating U.S. sanctions. “The vessel was seized in the North Atlantic pursuant to a warrant issued by a U.S. federal court after being tracked by USCGC Munro,” it said in a post on X.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth shared the post, adding: “The blockade of sanctioned and illicit Venezuelan oil remains in FULL EFFECT — anywhere in the world.”

The U.S. Southern Command, which oversees military activities in Latin America and the Caribbean, announced on X that the U.S. had also apprehended M/T Sophia, “a stateless, sanctioned dark fleet motor tanker”



that it said was “operating in international waters and conducting illicit activities in the Caribbean Sea.”

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi

Noem called the operations “two safe, effective boardings within hours of each other.” Noem said that the Bella 1 had been trying to evade the Coast Guard for weeks, “even changing its

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flag and painting a new name on the hull while being pursued, in a desperate and failed attempt to escape justice.” The “heroic” crew of USCGC Munro, she added, pursued the vessel “across the high seas and through treacherous storms.”

The U.S. seized two oil tankers off the coast of Venezuela last month as part of its blockade of sanctioned oil shipments to and from the country. The *Marinera* was one of a number of sanctioned oil tankers operating near Venezuela that have recently changed their flags to Russia.

Trump said Tuesday that Venezuela would hand over 30 million to 50 million barrels of oil to the U.S., as its vast reserves emerged as a key pillar of his plans — and a point of tension with Russia and China.

NBC News reported last month that the *Marinera*, then known as the *Bella 1*, had been on the U.S. sanctions list since June 2024.

It was pursued by the U.S. Coast Guard off Venezuela last month, and as of Jan. 5 it was off the west coast of Scotland in the North Atlantic, according to data from the ship-tracking website MarineTraffic.

Russia’s Transport Ministry said in a statement following the tanker’s capture that the *Marinera* had been granted temporary authorization to sail under the Russian flag in late December, and that it had lost all communication with the ship after U.S. forces boarded it on Wednesday.

“The high seas are governed by the principle of freedom of navigation, and no state has the right to use force against vessels duly registered under the jurisdiction of other states,” it said.

The Russian Foreign Ministry had said Tuesday that it was “monitoring with concern the anomalous situation surrounding” the tanker. The vessel was receiving “heightened attention from U.S. and NATO military forces that is clearly disproportionate to its peaceful status,” it said.

Russian propaganda TV channel RT

shared what it said was exclusive footage from aboard the tanker Tuesday night. It did not say where or when the footage was shot.

“Visibility is poor due to fog, and a U.S. Coast Guard ship is visible in the distance,” the caption accompanying the video said, adding that American reconnaissance aircraft were monitoring the vessel.

Flight tracking data shows that 13 Air Force C-17A Globemaster III, a large military transport aircraft, flew from U.S. Air Force bases to the U.K. between Saturday and Monday.

As the news broke of the tanker’s seizure, flight records showed multiple U.S. military aircraft near the vessel’s last known location.

Two U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon aircraft, typically used for maritime patrols, and a KC-135 Stratotanker aerial refueling tanker were recorded flying off the west and north coasts of Scot-

land. Two C-130J Hercules tactical transport aircraft and three U-28A Draco special operations aircraft were also recorded flying in the area.

The U.K. military has declined to comment on whether it’s tracking the tanker or any nearby Russian naval assets, or whether it has discussed with the U.S. any operation to seize the tanker.

But the *Marinera* may not be the only tanker threatening to undermine the U.S. blockade.

At least three other sanctioned oil tankers that were operating near Venezuela in recent weeks have changed their flags to Russia, according to the Russian Maritime Register of Shipping. The ships — the *Malak*, now renamed the *Sintez*; the *Dianchi*, now the *Expander*; and the *Veronica*, now the *Galileo* — had previously been sailing under the flags of Comoros and Guyana, according to MarineTraffic. (NBC)



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## New deadly clashes between Syrian forces and Kurdish fighters erupt in Aleppo

The deadliest clashes so far broke out Tuesday between Syrian government forces and Kurdish fighters in a contested area of the northern city of Aleppo, as efforts to merge the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces with the national army have shown little progress.

Syria's state-run SANA news agency said a soldier was killed and three others were wounded in an attack by the SDF. State TV later reported that three civilians, including two women, were killed and others were wounded, including two children, in shelling of a residential area that it blamed on the SDF. SANA also said nine Aleppo Directorate of Agriculture employees were wounded by SDF shelling that hit its office.

The SDF in a statement denied being behind the shelling that killed the civilians and said a shell launched by "factions affiliated with the Damascus government" landed in the al-Midan neighborhood. The SDF claimed the target was the adjacent Kurdish Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood.

"This indiscriminate shelling constitutes a direct attack on residential areas and exposes the lives of civilians to grave danger," it said.

The SDF also said a drone strike launched by government forces killed one resident of Sheikh Maqsoud and wounded two children, and that shelling in the nearby Bani Zaid neighborhood killed a woman and wounded dozens. There was no mention of those incidents in state media.

At Aleppo's Al-Razi Hospital, which received some of the wounded, Ahmad Abu Sheikh was waiting to see his 4-year-old daughter, Fatima, who was on the operating table for hours after being hit by shrapnel from a shell. He said she lost her eye.

"I just want to know what can I tell my daughter when I see her? Where did her eye go?" he said.



Afrin Jawan, a civil society activist in Sheikh Maqsoud, said in a message that thousands of civilians were besieged in Kurdish neighborhoods "and subjected to indiscriminate shelling with all types of heavy and medium weapons ... by factions affiliated with the Ministry of Defense in Damascus."

The predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Achrafieh in Aleppo have seen intermittent clashes in recent months. Previous rounds of fighting ended with truce agreements.

By Tuesday evening, a tense calm had returned, but clashes flared up again within hours.

The SDF has tens of thousands of fighters and is the main force to be absorbed into Syria's military.

The leadership in Damascus under interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa signed a deal in March with the SDF, which controls much of the northeast, for it to merge with the Syrian army by the end of 2025. There have been disagreements on how it would happen. In April, scores of SDF fighters left Sheikh Maqsoud and Achrafieh as part of the deal.

Officials from the central government and SDF met again Sunday in Damascus, but government officials said no tangible progress had been made.

Some of the factions that make up the new Syrian army, formed after the fall of former President Bashar Assad in a rebel offensive in December 2024, were previously Turkish-backed insurgent groups that have a long history of clashing with Kurdish forces.

The SDF for years has been the main U.S. partner in Syria in fighting against the Islamic State group, but Turkey considers the SDF a terrorist organization because of its association with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has waged a long-running insurgency in Turkey. A peace process is now underway.

The SDF and Syria's government have accused each other of seeking to derail the March agreement.

"The SDF organization once again proves that it does not recognize the March 10 Agreement and is trying to derail it and drag the army into an open battle of its choosing," Syria's Defense Ministry said in a statement Tuesday.

The SDF said government forces had committed a "blatant violation of international humanitarian law" by targeting residential neighborhoods. It called the attacks "planned and deliberate, systematically targeting infrastructure and essential services, including water and electricity." (AP)



## Zelensky says he does not have clear security pledge from allies

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky says European allies have not given him sound guarantees that they will protect his country in the case of a new Russian aggression.

“I am asking this very question to all our partners, and I have not received a clear, unambiguous answer yet,” he told reporters on Wednesday.

His comments come a day after the UK and France signed a declaration of intent on deploying troops in Ukraine if a peace deal to end the war with Russia is agreed.

But full security guarantees have not been agreed. The US, which has been leading efforts to end the invasion, reportedly did not sign such a pledge at talks in Paris on Tuesday.

After the Paris talks, which included some 30 countries that form the so-called Coalition of the Willing, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer said the UK and France would “establish military hubs across Ukraine” to deter future invasion, while French President Emmanuel Macron later said thousands of troops may be deployed.

Allies proposed that the US would take the lead in monitoring a truce. But the key issue of territorial concessions that Ukraine is being asked to grant to Russia as part of the peace proposals are still being discussed.

Moscow has not yet commented on the announcement made in the French capital.

Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and Moscow currently controls about 20% of Ukrainian territory.

Sir Keir described the joint statement as “a vital part of our commitment to stand with Ukraine for the long-term”.

He added: “It paves the way for the legal framework under which Brit-



ish, French and partner forces could operate on Ukrainian soil, securing Ukraine’s skies and seas, and regenerating Ukraine’s armed forces for the future.”

Zelensky hailed that agreement as a “huge step forward”.

A day later, however, he appeared less optimistic.

“I see the will, the political will, and that the partners are ready, and the partners are ready to give us strong sanctions, strong security guarantees,” he said when asked if European countries would defend Ukraine.

“But as long as we don’t have such security guarantees - legally binding, supported by parliaments, supported by the United States Congress - this question cannot be answered. And even if they do, you still have to rely primarily on your own strength.”

The Paris talks were also notable owing to the presence of US President Donald Trump’s peace envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner.

Witkoff said the allies “largely finished” their work on agreeing security protocols.

Russia continues to strike Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure across

the country on a daily basis

Last week, Zelensky said a peace deal was “90% ready”.

Territorial concessions and security guarantees have been at the forefront of unresolved issues for negotiators.

Putin has repeatedly warned that Ukrainian troops must withdraw from all of Ukraine’s eastern Donbas or Russia will seize it, rejecting any compromise over how to end the war.

Zelensky has so far ruled out ceding any territory, but has suggested that Ukraine could withdraw its troops to an agreed point - but only if Russia did the same.

Moscow currently controls about 75% of the Donetsk region, and some 99% of the neighbouring Luhansk. The two regions form the industrial Donbas region.

It has been intensifying attacks against Ukrainian cities - particularly targeting energy infrastructure. Russia has also made slow progress in capturing more Ukrainian territory.

Ukraine has hit back at Russian targets with drones, albeit with more limited success. (BBC)





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## Bravo claims he was forced out of Windies Test team

Former West Indies all-rounder Dwayne Bravo has revealed that it was not his choice to retire from Test cricket almost 11 years ago.

Speaking recently on the Beard Before Wicket Podcast, the 42-year-old said he believed then West Indies head coach, Otis Gibson, was responsible for pushing him out of the side.

Bravo, considered one of the greatest-ever T20 players, played 40 Tests for the West Indies, scoring 2200 runs, inclusive of three centuries and 13 half-centuries at an average of 31.42. He also took 86 wickets with two five-wicket hauls, at an average of 39.83.

“No, I didn’t decide to give up Test cricket; they decided to give me up. So, it’s funny that you ask that question because my assistant coach, Otis (Gibson), is the guy who was the coach of West Indies team back then, when my Test career came (to an end).”

“I didn’t think it had anything to do with Sammy because I think at that time Sammy was a young captain and the captaincy was just given to him, so he didn’t have much influence, so much say over what team was selected,” Bravo said.

“So, I always tell Gibbo it was him



**Former West Indies all-rounder Dwayne Bravo**

and the selectors back then and the board’s decision. It was never my personal decision to finish Test cricket and that’s (the) God honest truth.”

Bravo said he made the tough decision to retire after he was left off the Test team for five years. He recalled that the selectors saw him mainly as a white-ball cricketer, despite declaring his interests to play Test cricket.

“I had made it very clear that I wanted to continue my Test journey and obviously, they had different plans and different ideas and there’s not much I could have done.

“But if it was my decision, I would have played a lot more Test matches and longer,” Bravo admitted.

However, while he was disappointed to have his Test career cut short, Bravo acknowledged that the outcome also opened the door to a different chapter of his career and one that would eventually redefine his legacy.

“It was cut short and you lose here, but I gained here. Because I think if I continued to play more Test matches, I would not have the T20 career that I have,” he acknowledged.





## Bangladesh request ICC to move World Cup games from India



Players of the Bangladesh T20 team

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) said on Wednesday that the sport's global governing body, the International Cricket Council, is considering their request to move their Twenty20 World Cup matches out of India over safety concerns.

Amid fraught relations between the two countries, Indian Premier League (IPL) side Kolkata Knight Riders said at the weekend that the country's cricket board (BCCI) had told them to drop Bangladesh bowler Mustafizur Rahman.

Bangladesh's interim government has since banned broadcasts of the IPL, and the BCB have refused to play their World Cup matches in India, which is co-hosting the February 7 to March 8 event with Sri

Lanka.

Bangladesh are scheduled to play three World Cup matches in Kolkata next month.

"In its communication, the ICC has reiterated its commitment to ensuring the full and uninterrupted participation of the Bangladesh team in the tournament," the BCB said.

"The ICC has conveyed its willingness to work closely with the BCB to address the concerns raised and has assured that the board's inputs will be welcomed and duly considered as part of the detailed security planning for the event."

The ICC and Indian board did not immediately reply to requests for comment from Reuters.

Some media reports have sug-

gested the ICC, which is headed by former Indian board chief Jay Shah, had told Bangladesh they must play in India or forfeit the matches.

However, the BCB said reports of such an ultimatum were "completely false" and that it would work with the ICC to arrive at a solution that ensures their successful participation.

Tensions have risen in recent weeks between India and Bangladesh. Hundreds protested near Bangladesh's High Commission in New Delhi last month after a Hindu factory worker was beaten and set on fire in Bangladesh's Mymensingh district over allegations he insulted the Prophet Muhammad.



## New Zealand bowler Duffy to make T20 World Cup bow



**Jacob Duffy**

WELLINGTON (Reuters) - New Zealand fast bowler Jacob Duffy is set to make his Twenty20 World Cup debut next month after being picked in the 15-member squad led by Mitchell Santner on Wednesday.

The 31-year-old, currently the second-ranked bowler in T20 internationals, was in red-hot form across formats in 2025 when he claimed a total 81 international wickets from 36 matches, breaking Richard Hadlee's 40-year record of 79.

Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry and Adam Milne are the pace bowlers alongside pace-bowling all-rounder Jimmy Neesham.

Both Ferguson and Henry may take brief paternity leave during the tournament, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said in a statement.

Kyle Jamieson will travel with the squad as the pace-bowling reserve.

Apart from Santner, New Zealand will have four other spin options in specialist Ish Sodhi and all-rounders Michael Bracewell, Glenn Phillips and Rachin Ravindra.

Finn Allen, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway, Daryl Mitchell and Tim Seifert are the specialist batters.

"I'm really happy with the skills and experience of this squad and I think we have a group which can make New Zealand proud," head coach Rob Walter said.

"We've got plenty of power and skill in the batting, quality bowlers who can adapt to conditions, plus five all-rounders who all bring something slightly different.

"This is an experienced group and the players are no strangers to playing in the sub-continent, which will be valuable."

New Zealand exited in the group stage of the 2024 World Cup in West Indies but will be better prepared this time having arranged a five-match T20 series against defending champions and tournament co-host India this month.

They will begin their Group D campaign against Afghanistan in Chennai on February 8.

New Zealand squad: Mitchell Santner (captain), Finn Allen, Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway, Jacob Duffy, Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Daryl Mitchell, Adam Milne, James Neesham, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Tim Seifert, and Ish Sodhi.





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## Gauff leads US past Greece into United Cup semis



**Coco Gauff**

PERTH, Australia (AP) — After a singles loss and social media drama earlier in the week, Coco Gauff did all her talking on court Wednesday in the United Cup quarterfinals.

Gauff won twice — once in singles and then a clinching victory in mixed doubles — to send the Americans into the semifinals in Sydney on Saturday.

Gauff beat Maria Sakkari 6-3, 6-2 to give the defending champion United States a 1-0 lead over Greece.

Taylor Fritz, affected by knee tendinitis, had a chance in his singles match to clinch the quarterfinal against Stefanos Tsitsipas, but lost 6-4, 7-5. That sent the quarterfinal match to a mixed doubles decider.

In that match, Gauff and Christian

Harrison beat Tsitsipas and Sakkari 4-6, 6-4, 10-8. It was on track for a runaway in the third-set, 10-point tiebreaker when the Americans led 4-0 and 5-1, but the Greek pair rallied to level it at 6-6. Gauff and Harrison held on for the win.

“I think I was striking the ball well today, and when that happens, my movement on the court is also good,” Gauff said after her singles win. “I usually know it’s going to be a good day.”

On Monday, Gauff dropped a post on social media about a half-hour before she started her singles match, hoping to add context to her recent comments about American tennis fans.

The ensuing match didn’t go well for the No. 4-ranked Gauff, who lost the

first five games and struggled in a 6-1, 6-7 (3), 6-0 loss to No. 42 Jessica Bouzas Maneiro.

But Fritz won his singles match against Spain and Gauff and Harrison combined in mixed doubles to clinch top spot in Group A.

In a night quarterfinal at Perth on Wednesday, Stan Wawrinka, playing in his farewell tour this year before retiring, was scheduled to lead Switzerland against Argentina.

At Sydney, Hubert Hurkacz and Iga Świątek were victorious in their singles matches to give Poland a winning 2-0 lead over Netherlands and a place in the quarterfinals from Group F. Poland is expected to play Australia in the quarterfinals.



## Scorpions stay unbeaten and move to top of First Division



*The Freemans Village Scorpions*

**By Elwin Francis**

The Freemans Village Scorpions continued their unbeaten run and moved to the top of the Antigua and Barbuda Football Association's (ABFA) First Division League on Tuesday.

The Scorpions notched up their seventh win in eight matches by snatching a 1-0 victory against Parham FC at the ABFA Technical Center.

Me'Kai Lewis broke the deadlock when he scored the only goal of the match to snatch victory for the Scorpions.

The result allows the Freemans Village Scorpions to overtake Golden Grove FC at the top of the standings. The Scorpions moved on to 22 points, two more than Golden Grove FC, which has played nine matches.

Parham FC remains on 15 points after suffering their third defeat in 10 matches.

Five Islands FC moved into third place after securing their fifth win in

11 matches with a 4-2 victory against the Greenbay Hoppers at the ABFA Technical Center.

All the goals were scored in the second half, with Lazaro Saurez scoring twice for Five Islands with strikes in the 60th and 88th minutes. The other goals for Five Islands FC were converted by Demario Roberts in the 71st minute and Shane Cochrane in the 76th minute.

The two goals for the Greenbay Hoppers were scored by Ammiel Joseph-Greenaway in the 46th minute and Jari Jackson in the 65th minute.

The result allows Five Islands FC to advance to 19 points, while the Greenbay Hoppers remain on 15 points after succumbing to their third loss in eight matches.

Sherquan Daniels scored twice as Bolans FC recorded their second win in 10 matches by pulling off a 5-3 victory against English Harbour FC at the Jennings playing field.

Daniels had conversions in the fifth and 16th minutes, while the other goals for Bolans FC were scored by Jaric Richards in the 39th minute, Obediah Browne in the 46th minute, and David Joseph in the 84th minute.

The goal scorers for English Harbour FC are Akeem Weekes in the sixth minute, Nosakhare Edoleyi in the 52nd minute, and Taj Simon in the 63rd minute.

Bolans FC moved on to 11 points, while English Harbour FC remains on 12 points after crashing to their seventh defeat in 11 matches.

However, there was no play on Tuesday in the ABFA's Second Division after the only scheduled match between unbeaten Kelton Dalso Real Blizzard and the Young Warriors at Buckleys was postponed.

Real Blizzard FC has 14 points from six matches, while the Young Warriors are without any points after losing all five matches played.