

After high-level talks with the Prime Minister Dragon dance

US Secretary of State changes tune on T&T-Venezuela OFAC licences but insists Maduro regime should not reap major benefits



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, right, chats with Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar at the State Department in Washington yesterday. AP PHOTO

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Three months after Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar declared the Dragon gas deal “dead” — and five months after revoking two Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) licences to explore the Dragon and Cocuina-Manakin fields in Venezuelan waters—the United States government has reversed its decision.

The development came following a high-level meeting between Persad-Bissessar and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the State Department in Washington, DC, yesterday.

In a video uploaded to the United National Congress’ Facebook page shortly after the meeting, Persad-Bissessar described the talks as “very important discussions for bilateral interests” and hinted that positive developments would be announced soon.

In a statement issued by the Office of the Prime Minister soon afterwards, it confirmed that the US government now supports Trinidad and Tobago’s efforts to develop cross-border hydrocarbon resources.

“Subsequent to the meeting, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago was informed that the Secretary of State supports the approval of the relevant Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) licences to begin discussions toward developing its cross-border hydrocarbons,” the statement read.

The release said the support was secured during talks between Persad-Bissessar and Rubio focused on matters of mutual interest affecting both countries, including national security, energy security, and economic security. Rubio reportedly praised Persad-Bissessar’s leadership and reaffirmed the long-standing partnership between the United States and Trinidad and Tobago, grounded in historic ties and shared regional goals.

Contacted hours after the meeting, Energy Minister Dr Roodal Moonilal lauded the Prime Minister’s efforts, while criticising former prime ministers Dr Keith Rowley and Stuart Young, who also served as energy minister.

“It is a great day for Trinidad and Tobago!! Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar has delivered the most telling achievement in obtaining the US government’s support for our renewed proposal to resurrect the Dragon project, which died at the hands of Stuart Young and Keith Rowley!! In four short months, the Prime Minister has delivered a profound and most remarkable contribution to our economic recovery!!” Moonilal said via WhatsApp.

Reversal of approach

Persad-Bissessar had expressed little optimism for the Dragon gas project following the swearing-in of her Cabinet on May 4, after their sweeping victory over the People’s National Movement (PNM) in the April 28 General Election.

Speaking to the media then, she said: “The Dragon gas is dead. We’d be foolish to not look elsewhere and, in fact, we should have started that search long ago. We should not have put everything into the Dragon gas. That is dead.

It is dead. They (PNM) kept it alive for ten years and we couldn’t do that in ten years, you’re not going to do it now.”

She indicated that her Government would focus on opportunities elsewhere in the Caribbean, including Grenada, Guyana, Suriname, and Tobago, where exploration work had begun during her previous term.

“Let’s look right here in the Caricom—as I mentioned Grenada, Guyana, Suriname. And, of course, in Tobago, we had begun work when I was last in office, looking at Tobago to see if we are so close by there could possibly be oil and gas in Tobago’s territorial waters,” she said.

Persad-Bissessar also confirmed that Rubio had not raised the Dragon gas deal during a telephone call on May 3, reiterating “not at all, Dragon gas is dead.”

On whether she would pursue the deal with Venezuela, she added: “Not at this point in time. Who knows, in the fullness of time, all things are possible. But at this point in time, I am looking at the Caricom. I’m looking at our own cousins, brothers and sisters in the Caricom.”

US licences and project background

Yesterday’s decision by Rubio comes almost five months after then-prime minister Stuart Young announced on April 8, 20 days before the General Election, that the US had revoked two OFAC licences for offshore gas projects with Venezuela.

These licences, which had allowed Shell, BP, and the National Gas Company to plan projects exempt from US sanctions on Venezuela, initially had a May 27 deadline for activities to wind down.

Trinidad and Tobago first received an OFAC licence for the Dragon gas field on October 31, 2023, followed by a second licence for the Cocuina-Manakin field on May 31, 2024, both valid for two years.

The Dragon field, granted to Shell by Venezuela in 2023 under a 30-year licence, holds an estimated four trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. The project was expected to supply gas to Trinidad for conversion into liquefied natural gas (LNG).

US approval is necessary because the companies must negotiate and plan development in compliance with Washington’s sanctions on Venezuela’s energy sector and its state-owned company, PDVSA.

The renewed support signals a potential reopening of dialogue on projects that had been considered stalled under the previous administration, marking a significant shift in Trinidad and Tobago’s energy diplomacy.