

PM: Rubio vows US won't harm T&T

PORT OF SPAIN

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'WE ARE not going to harm Trinidad and Tobago.'

This is the commitment that United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio gave to Prime Minister Stuart Young during their bilateral engagement on Wednesday in Kingston, Jamaica.

Young, reporting to the nation on his talks with Rubio during a post-Cabinet news conference at Whitehall, Port of Spain, yesterday, said that during the meeting with Rubio, he went into 'granular detail' on the importance to Trinidad and Tobago and the region of the Dragon gas deal with Venezuela and what it entailed.

'Exactly how this transaction would be structured; the work that we have already done, along with Shell, to make it a reality; and the effects that it will have, in particular, on the rest of the region. I was able to set out how it would also affect the rest of the Caricom region because of the important role that we play in supporting some of our Caricom brothers and sister nations.... That was accepted.

'Secretary of State Rubio did indicate that he was pleased to receive this information... and he said that US foreign policy is in no way meant to affect or harm Trinidad and Tobago, in particular, with what we are doing for energy security. And there was a recognition that Trinidad and Tobago's role in energy security is not limited to our domestic situation.

'He explained to me the US policy that they're applying. I understood the US policy, and we agreed that there is a lot of room in there for Trinidad and Tobago to achieve what is needed domestically-the Dragon gas deal-as well as the role that we play throughout the region that they will give us support on and the achievement of the policy.

'I made it very clear that Venezuela is our closest neighbour and we have a relationship with Venezuela that can be beneficial for the region and the Western Hemisphere because there's a lot of built-up respect,' Young said.

A lot of discretion

In response to a question on whether T& T was seeking to get an exemption from any sanctions imposed on Venezuela, Young said that was part of the conversation with Rubio on Wednesday.

He said Rubio recognised that the OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) licence given to T& T by the US is in place until October.

'There is a lot of discretion in there...which is invaluable to Trinidad and Tobago,' Young said.

He said this country had built up credibility in Washington over the last few years, which counted for a lot.

'The Secretary of State Rubio was very clear that he appreciated the opportunity to hear from us first hand and from the Prime Minister first hand on that (energy) and the effects it would have, and he kept emphasising, 'We are not going to harm Trinidad and Tobago,' Young said.

'I did raise the point that our OFAC licence for Dragon is (ends) in October. Secretary of State Rubio said: 'Stuart, Prime Minister, that is some time off from now. We are going to continue to work with you,' Young said.

He added: 'Nobody is going to give that blanket commitment at this stage. But I emphasise, he said 'I am not going to harm Trinidad and Tobago' after hearing how important it was for us,' Young said.

On the issue of the US' request to name the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua as a foreign terrorist organisation, Young said his Government was prepared to do this, and he had already spoken with Attorney General Camille Robinson-Regis in this regard.

He said he asked Rubio for information and evidence that would help the T& T Government to go to court and make the necessary application.

'We want to take the pre-emptive strike; let's go to court and see what we could do in having them declared a terrorist organisation under our laws, and Secretary of State Rubio immediately agreed that they would provide us with whatever information and evidence they have,' Young said.

Young said he also raised the issue of potential tariffs being imposed by the US on shipping which has Chinese vessels as part of the fleet. **Rubio: Is it congratulations or condolences?**

Young said it was disappointing to hear persons who have no responsibility saying that the US would be looking at T& T in a negative light because of the amount of time former prime minister Dr Keith Rowley and himself have spent talking with Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro with regard to energy arrangements.

'It is the exact opposite,' he said. 'I am happy to stand here today and tell the population that the meeting (with Rubio) was a very good meeting..

a successful meeting, as far as we are concerned in Trinidad and Tobago.... Yesterday was a good day for Trinidad and Tobago.'

He added that Rubio indicated he would like to visit Trinidad and Tobago, and he extended an invitation to him to visit this country 'at the appropriate time'.

'The exchanges between Secretary of State Rubio and myself were very positive.... We are going to stay engaged in communication.... That is no 100% surety that things may not change along the way, but the commitment that there is not going to be any harm to Trinidad and Tobago and us having the opportunity through me, as your Prime Minister, to explain first hand to the decision makers (in Washington) how it (decisions) affect us and the region, and the role we

play in energy security outside of the region, in the region, in South America, in Europe, in the United States, redounded to our benefit yesterday,' Young said.

Young said he mentioned the existing good relationship between the two countries and the fact that the US was T& T's largest trading partner.

He also stressed in the meeting that T& T is seven miles off the coast of Venezuela and the closest Caribbean island to South America, and the role that T& T plays in between Venezuela, the US and Europe.

The Prime Minister said he also took the opportunity to advocate for other matters that impact other Caricom member states.

He said they discussed the role that Caricom has been playing in recent times and in the past in assisting in the operations dealing with and targeting transnational organised crime, which is of paramount importance to the US and Caricom.

He said they also discussed T& T's acquisition of national security equipment, including this country's plans to purchase equipment from the US.

Young said there was a lot of friendly banter during the meeting.

A video clip posted on the Prime Minister's Facebook page showed Young and Rubio in their first encounter in Jamaica. Commenting on Young's elevation as he shook his hand and patted him on his arm, Rubio joked: 'Is it congratulations or condolences?' Young responded: 'You should tell me. You in this (business) much longer than I am,' as both men chuckled. Rubio said: 'Not long, nine weeks.'

Young also had a meeting with Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley, as well as with the delegation from Haiti, and paid a courtesy call on the Jamaica Prime Minister Andrew Holness.