

## St Vincent PM urges peace and calm between T&T and Venezuela



St Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves PHOTO BY VASHTI SINGH



Homeland Security Minister Roger Alexander





Minister of Defence Wayne Sturge PHOTO BY ABRAHAM DIAZ

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St Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves has urged both Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela to exercise restraint and resolve their differences peacefully and in line with international law.

“All I would like to do is to urge both neighbours to continue to act peacefully in accordance with international law,” Gonsalves said in an interview with Guardian Media yesterday.

He warned against inflaming the situation with strong language. “As far as practicable, we do not incline the situation with any excessive rhetoric. We just take our patience into account. And whatever is the problem, we solve them maturely between two neighbours.”

Tensions between T&T and Venezuela escalated last week after Venezuelan Justice Minister Diosdado Cabello alleged on his programme Con El Mazo Dando, that a Trinidadian by the name of “Guis Kendell Jerome”, had been captured en route to Venezuela with a group labelled “terrorists”

in an attempt to destabilise their government.

Senior police officials in this country have since confirmed that the person named by Cabello had not appeared in T&T's criminal database.

During last Thursday's post-Cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar added to the issue as she delivered a deadly warning to Venezuela that T&T was off-limits.

She revealed that the T&T Coast Guard (TTCG) would have been placed on alert to use deadly force if any vessel from Venezuela sought to access local waters illegally.

Persad-Bissessar declared, "I want to make it very clear to the Venezuelan government and officials that they can do whatever they want on Venezuelan territory, but they cannot come here. T&T territory is off limits to them."

Contacted on the issue yesterday, the St Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister was asked whether Caricom should intervene in the developing tension, he replied, "Maybe not, maybe not as yet, but that's why I'm urging peace and calm."

Gonsalves reaffirmed Caricom's and the region's broader commitment to peace.

"That would be what my own broad position would do as someone who supports very much—and we all do, and Caricom does, and so too does Venezuela—we support our region as a region of peace. We want to see good neighbourliness."

He cautioned against drawing in outside forces. "If there is any challenge which arises, we should not interfere in the internal affairs of any other state. We should not bring any foreign power into this particular matter. This is a matter which we have to be careful that is not blown out of proportions."

Guardian Media also reached out to other regional leaders including Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister Gaston Browne and Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley but all calls went unanswered.

Guyana's President Irfaan Ali was also contacted through a communications official but no response was received up to news time.

Guyana has been at odds with Venezuela in a territorial dispute over the Essequibo region.

Meanwhile, Minister of Homeland Security Roger Alexander said while this country remains on high alert, communication was key.

Efforts to contact Defence Minister Wayne Sturge yesterday on Saturday's meeting with national security and law enforcement officials to discuss allegations of a local link to destabilise Venezuela were unsuccessful.

Alexander directed all questions to Sturge yesterday, but would only say that local law enforcement agencies had been placed on high alert.

"We are not looking for anything, but what I can tell you is that the security forces are always on the alert.

"So to say that they are on full alert now ... it is just a normal day in the life of these officers."

However, he said there remained room for dialogue.

"At the end of the day, communication is key and that might be able to resolve a lot of these things

going on right now.”

Foreign and Caricom Affairs Minister, Sean Sobers did not respond to calls and messages about Saturday’s extraordinary meeting to decide how the Government intends to address the escalating tensions between T&T and Venezuela.

On Friday, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro urged Persad-Bissessar to tone down the deadly force rhetoric used.

In a release, the Venezuelan authorities said the warning and attitude by the Prime Minister was both virulent and high-handed and also raised “serious suspicions of complicity.”

He advised that it only, “Undermines the good cooperative relations between our countries in key areas.”