

Burris: Tobago safe, tourists welcome despite US warships

ELIZABETH GONZALES TOBAGO CORRESPONDENT

Tourism Secretary Tashia Burris says Tobago remains safe, open for business, and resilient despite rising regional tensions over Venezuela and the growing presence of United States warships in the Southern Caribbean.

Speaking to Guardian Media in Barbados during Carifesta, Burris said Tobago's main tourism market continues to be domestic, and that stability in T&T is what matters most for the island's economy.

"For me, our largest source market has always been Trinidad by numbers. So, except that there is a depressed appetite for travel to Tobago, I don't see what is happening there affecting our largest source market, which is our domestic market," she explained.

Burris added that other international markets such as the United Kingdom and Germany are not easily swayed by US military activity in the region.

"Certainly, I know our international partners will be looking on to see what is happening, but our other source markets are the UK and Germany, and usually what is happening in the United States doesn't really affect persons wanting to come to the destination."

According to Burris, Tobago has always been able to market itself as a distinct product, separate from wider geopolitical issues.

"They understand that Tobago offers a distinctly different product to Trinidad, and a lot of times we are insulated from the things that are happening in the wider region where those matters are concerned, but it's something that we will continue to monitor, and definitely we always want to give the assurance that Tobago remains safe, remains open for business."

She added, "All of what you want to come and see, feel, and enjoy, we have, and we take every opportunity to welcome our visitors, whether they're coming from Trinidad, whether they're coming from the region, whether they're coming from international destinations, to make Tobago your home for a short time."

Her comments came as US military presence has increased near Venezuela. In recent weeks, the US has deployed destroyers, a guided-missile cruiser, an amphibious assault group, and even a nuclear-powered submarine to the region, alongside thousands of marines.

Officially, Washington has said the operations target drug trafficking, but analysts warn the build-up could also be a strategic show of force against Venezuela's leadership.

Asked about the Tobago House of Assembly's stance on the presence of US ships, Burris was cautious in her response saying: "I would not want to pre-empt any statement that the Chief Secretary may make, but we are still a twin island nation, and certainly where we stand is that we will want to promote any situation that ensures that the sovereignty of Trinidad and Tobago is not trampled on, and we also maintain great diplomatic relations with our fellow Caribbean nations."

She stressed that while her office's role is limited, peace in the region is crucial to Tobago's economy.

"You know, these conversations have to happen at a higher level than my office, but certainly where we sit, we always want a situation where peace reigns, because it will only do well for our economy, it will only do well for our tourism product," she said.

Burris warned that Tobago has already faced a series of shocks and cannot withstand further destabilisation.

"We really have had a challenging time coming out of COVID-19 and all of the things that have the knock-down effects of, you know, having to recover after a shock like that. We have had two SoEs for this year alone, we had our oil spill last year, we had a shark attack, so Tobago simply cannot afford any more situations that will, you know, affect our tourism product negatively."

She called for continuous dialogue "so that for us, anything that maintains peace and tranquillity, we are behind that. So the doors for conversation and diplomacy should always remain open as far as possible."