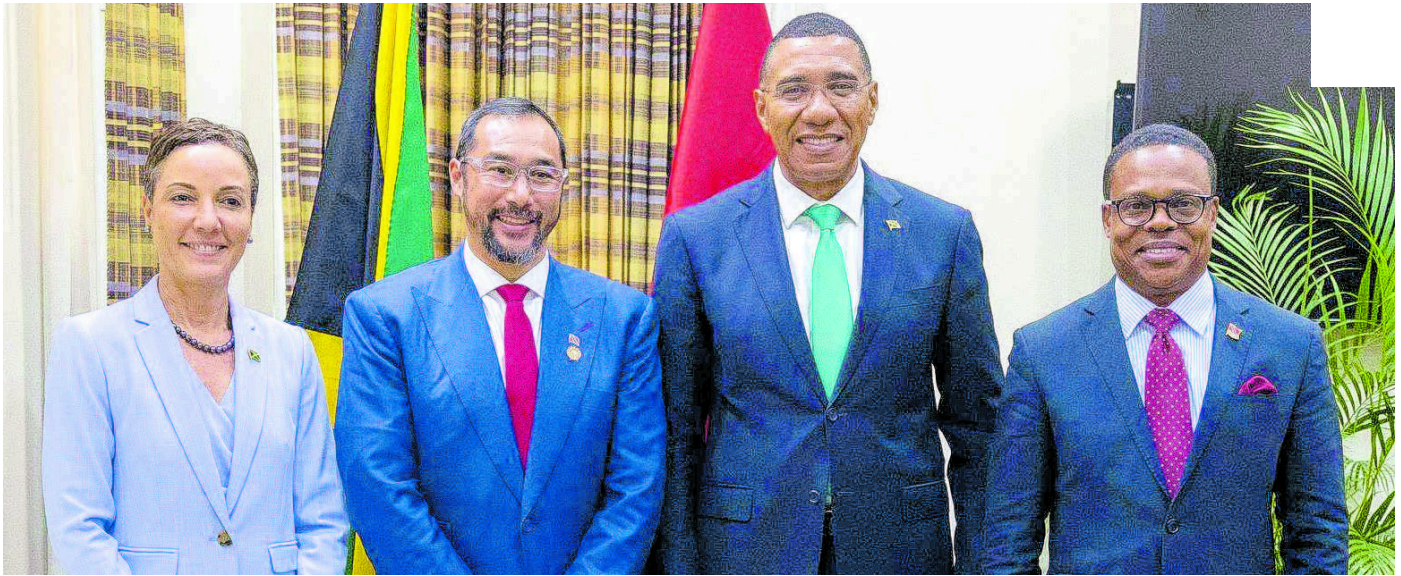


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Rubio urges T&T to support US moves against Venezuela's Maduro regime:



Jamaica's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade Kamina Johnson Smith, left, Prime Minister Stuart Young, Jamaica Prime Minister Andrew Michael Holness and Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs Dr Amery Browne at the Office of the Prime Minister in Jamaica yesterday. PHOTO COURTESY OPM FB PAGE

SAMPSON NANTON AND KAY-MARIE FLETCHER

United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio yesterday called on Prime Minister Stuart Young to support moves against Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro's administration during a bilateral meeting in Kingston, Jamaica.

The US State Department issued a limited statement on the discussions afterwards, saying Rubio and Young spoke on the Trump administration's decision to name the dangerous Venezuelan gang, Tren de Aragua, as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) and encouragement for regional partners to take similar steps.

The State Department added: "Secretary Rubio encouraged Prime Minister Young to join the United States and other Caribbean democracies in limiting malign influence in the region."

However, the statement said nothing on the contentious topic of the Dragon gas field located in Venezuelan waters, which T&T has been hoping to exploit with the backing of the US.

The Trump regime has taken a hard stance against Venezuelan oil and gas extraction, production and sales, by threatening heavy sanctions against countries that do energy business with the Maduro regime.

Around 1.30 pm yesterday, the State Department added another layer to the threats, posting on its Facebook page a tweet made by Rubio on Tuesday, which read: “The US will not tolerate any third-countries or their oil companies producing, extracting, or exporting oil and oil-related products with the Maduro regime in Venezuela.”

In the statement that followed Rubio’s meeting with Young yesterday, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce barely skimmed over the issue of energy security, saying, “Secretary Rubio thanked Prime Minister Young for Trinidad and Tobago’s cooperation to promote energy security, deepen our security partnership, and enhance coordination on the deportation of illegal aliens.”

The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) has promised that Young will speak on his meeting with Rubio following today’s Cabinet meeting in Port-of-Spain.

The OPM also issued a statement, saying yesterday’s discussion centred on several issues, including national security, trade and energy and added that they were productive, with both parties emphasising the importance of the relationship between both countries and pledging to deepen ties.

Foreign and Caricom Affairs Minister Dr Amery Browne, who was also at yesterday’s meeting in Jamaica, went a little further to describe the talks as “excellent,” but was unwilling to give any more details about the meeting when contacted yesterday.

Prior to his trip to Jamaica, Young had expressed confidence about the meeting, saying on Tuesday he was preparing the most compelling argument for T&T.

While in Jamaica, both Rubio and Young also met separately with the chair of the Transitional Presidential Council of Haiti, Fritz Alphonse Jean, and Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley.

Rubio also doubled down on his government’s stance on Cuban doctors, saying the US had no real problem with Cuban medical doctors operating in the region, but wanted to ensure that Cuba was not enabling forced labour.

Yesterday, following his first bilateral meeting with Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness, Rubio said the US is not trying to sever the programme utilised by several Caricom nations, including T&T, he stressed that the Cuban regime exploits its doctors.

“The doctors are not paid in many parts of the world. You pay the Cuban government. The Cuban government decides how much if anything to give them.

They take away their passports.

They basically operate as forced labour in many places.

“Now, there are places that have better labour standards, perhaps Jamaica is one of those and that’s fine, but I’m describing generally what the programme has been. It has operated in that way in many parts of the world and placed these people in tremendous danger, so I think we can all agree that the trafficking and labour, be it doctors or farm workers, is not something that we would want to be supportive of and we find that to be an egregious practice on the part of the Cuban regime... It’s not that they are Cuban doctors. It’s that the regime does not pay these doctors, take away their passports and basically it is in many ways forced labour and that we cannot be in support of.”

However, following talks with Rubio yesterday, Jamaica Prime Minister Andrew Holness made it clear his country was standing by their use of doctors from the programme.

When Guardian Media reached out to Health Minister Terrence Deyalsingh yesterday to clarify whether T&T pays the Cuban government or the Cuban doctors directly, he said, “Please allow the diplomatic effort to work”.