



**STATEMENT BY CHIEF MINISTER
DR. THE HONOURABLE D. ORLANDO SMITH
THIRTY-FIRST SITTING OF THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTEENTH
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
Tuesday, 11 October, 2005
10:00 a.m.**

UPDATE ON CRIME SITUATION

Madam Speaker:

We gather today in this Honourable House, still very much in the shadow of the recent spate of tragic events.

We share with all the people of the BVI at the loss of those who are no longer with us; our righteous anger at the senseless violence that has struck our shores, and, above all, our shared resolve to put the criminals to route and restore safety and peace to our Territory.

Madam Speaker, on behalf of this Government and the people of this Territory, I extend my condolences to the family of Roland Serrano who passed away in a Puerto Rico hospital following an unfortunate and tragic crime committed against him. Let us keep his family in our prayers.

Madam Speaker, I want to use this opportunity to update this Honourable House and the people of the BVI on the steps that we have taken over the past days to secure this goal and what we plan to do moving forward.

We have formulated and are in the process of implementing our announced 7-point Action Plan for fighting crime in the BVI.

I announced that we would bring in outside help and as a first step, we have brought in experts from the United Kingdom to provide their advice and counsel about practical steps and recommendations that can be taken to make our security forces and police more effective.

The first such recommendation – that we combine several units of the security services, including Special Investigations, the Drug Unit, the Marine Unit, the Air wing and Intelligence Units under a single unified command.

This newly formed single unit will now be reconstituted as the Drug and Violent Crime Task Force and it will serve as the sharp point of the spear in our fight against crime.

In addition, the Police have been instructed to step up surveillance operations of suspected criminals, and to increase routine stops and other on-the-ground tactics that are meant to deter crime.

Madam Speaker: It has been reported that as part of these increased activities, some additional traffic stops have been made, including many innocent, law-abiding citizens.

I want to use this opportunity to ask members of the community to be patient with this new and heightened level of security. The plain truth is that the price of peace and security is eternal vigilance. And while we must ensure that the Police act with all due restraint to minimize the inconvenience to all innocent citizens, we must also recognize that by casting a wide net, the Police increase their chances of catching criminals.

The bother of a brief stop on the street is surely a small price to pay if it drives the criminals underground and helps keep our streets and neighbourhoods safe.

Madam Speaker: as we work to support our Police and provide them with the tools and assistance they need to keep us safe, we continue to firmly insist that only through cooperation with the community can the Police's mandate be fully realized.

The Police have an affirmative responsibility not only to conduct themselves in a professional manner – but also to reach out to the community and forge stronger bonds of trust and mutual respect. Toward that end, I am pleased to report that we are working assiduously to reactivate the Police Advisory Committee. This important Committee will serve to bring together leadership from the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force with community leaders to create a forum where views can be exchanged and concerns can be raised and addressed.

Too often, the feeling in the community is that they are alienated and kept at a distance from the Police. We must change that culture of distrust forever. The Police and the community must think and act as one – working together to achieve the common goal of a safer BVI.

Finally, Madam Speaker: We are moving forward aggressively to develop and introduce new legislation to more stringently regulate firearms in our Territory and to increase the penalties for gun crimes.

This process may take some time – we must ensure that the legislation is prepared properly and does not suffer from hasty drafting because this issue could not be more important.

Madam Speaker: I am a doctor. I have treated victims of gun wounds. And I can tell you from my heart that there are few things more devastating than the impact of a bullet cutting through a person's body. It is a horror that need not and must not exist in our Territory. By introducing strong legislation we will be doing two critical things:

First, we will be creating an iron-clad legal framework for defining and prosecuting gun crimes. That means ensuring that laws already on the books are properly enforced, and that the punishments fit the crimes.

Second, this legislation will send a powerful message to every citizen and resident of the BVI: guns will not be tolerated here.

This Territory will not allow itself to become another sad corner of the world where thugs walk the streets with a deadly weapon stuck in their belts. That is not who we are. And that is not who we will ever become.

Madam Speaker: I would like to conclude with a word of thanks to all the Members of this House both from the Government and the Opposition, along with religious, community and business leaders from across the Territory who have responded with such great energy and resolve to the challenge of crime.

These past days have shown us all what can be done when we stand united. I would like to take this moment to commend this spirit of togetherness --- and to urge everyone to do their part to make sure that our unity is not just a momentary response to crisis – but rather a new standard to which we can all continually aspire.

Thank you.