



Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica

STATEMENT

HON. ROOSEVELT SKERRIT

**PRIME MINISTER
OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA**

March 18, 2022

Earlier this week, I received official confirmation from the Minister of Foreign Affairs that a signing ceremony had taken place, effectively establishing diplomatic relations between the Governments of the Commonwealth of Dominica and the Arab Republic of Syria.

The Minister himself made clear in the correspondence to me that he was not party to the signing and indeed, was fundamentally opposed to the move, at this time.

Those were my immediate sentiments as well. Indeed, in my response to the Hon. Minister on Monday afternoon, I registered my “absolute bewilderment by this development”. I went on to indicate that this matter was troubling, on several fronts, and that it needed to be explained as a matter of urgency.

I should pause here to point out that the management of sensitive matters of governance requires what is commonly referred to as “due process”. You cannot just read something on social media or hear something in passing, and rush to judgement or action.

There are several established norms of practice and behavior that are required in the execution of one’s duty as Prime Minister of a country. While opposition forces can and do enjoy and exploit the luxury of hearing today and rushing to press tomorrow, the conduct of a mature, responsible government requires that certain protocols and processes be followed and honored, not in the breach.

In this regard, on Monday when this matter was formally brought to my attention, I immediately gave instruction for Dominica’s Ambassador to the United Nations to be summoned to an urgent, in-person, meeting in my office, yesterday, Thursday, the 17th day of March, 2022. This was the earliest practical time, as the first available direct flight from the United States would have been on Wednesday afternoon.

So the meeting was convened and I invited not only the relevant public officers but also four senior government ministers and senior legal counsel to the government, not only to sit in on the meeting, but more so to participate fully.

For little short of two hours, we examined the circumstance that would have led to the signing of a document constituting an agreement for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Syria.

I should point out here that no existing laws were broken. There was nothing unlawful about the act of the Ambassador.

As set out in the Minister's note to me on Monday, March 14th, the process of establishing Diplomatic Relations can either be initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Business and Diaspora Relations, on the instructions of Cabinet, or by a foreign government writing officially to express interest in establishing relations with the Government of Dominica.

Where the initiation is that of Capital, meaning the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is accepted that the relevant due diligence has been done and economic and historical profiles reviewed, which would form the basis of the Cabinet Paper that results in directives to establish relations.

Alternatively, where the foreign government is the initiator, this is usually done through either one of Dominica's Mission or Embassy; given the jurisdiction. The request in turn is forwarded to Capital, with a Brief attached, giving details of the country and a diplomatic opinion to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, from the relevant Mission/Embassy. Once the submission is reviewed by the Minister, a Cabinet paper is prepared for consideration.

As it relates to the recent establishment of Diplomatic Relations with the Arab Republic of Syria, the Minister of Foreign Affairs reported to me on Monday that he was aware that in March, 2021, the Government of Syria, through its embassy in Cuba, wrote the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirming interest in establishing diplomatic relations with Dominica.

For the record, neither the Minister nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Roseau gave instruction or did they express interest in or desire to pursue the establishment of relations with Syria at this or any foreseeable time. We all have watched in horror and observed social, political and indeed heinous developments in Syria. Such a decision would therefore not have been taken without due consideration.

It was therefore quite surprising when we learnt of the signing of the relevant documents by the Ambassador and it was for this reason that I gave clear instruction for the Ambassador to be summoned to a meeting in my office yesterday, Thursday.

At that meeting, the Ambassador was permitted to explain her reasoning and actions. She was cross- examined by public officers, senior ministers and senior counsel. At the end of the session, it was apparent and indeed evident, that there was a clear lapse of judgement on the part of the Ambassador to have proceeded with the signing of such documents without consultation or instruction from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ultimately the Cabinet of Ministers.

I expressed my outrage at this development and indeed the outrage of several Dominicans living at home and abroad.

This is not the time or place for me to comment on recent and indeed current civil and socio-political developments in Syria. But suffice to say that the Government that I have the honor to lead was and still is not in support of

establishing or pursuing relations with Syria under the current circumstances.

Accordingly, following the meeting of yesterday's date, I have instructed that the appropriate communication be dispatched from Roseau to Syria, setting out clearly the policy and position of this government and that provisions of the document as signed be considered suspended indefinitely.

I have also since met and spoken with Ambassador Loreen Bannis-Roberts and in light of her own admitted lapse of judgement in this particular matter, Ambassador Bannis-Roberts has formally tendered her resignation from the post of Resident Ambassador, and I have accepted that resignation. The resignation takes effect May 31st but the outgoing Ambassador shall proceed on leave from all duties, effective today, Friday, March 18th.

In due course, as Prime Minister, I shall announce the name of Dominica's new Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

I take this opportunity also to address the concerns of many, at home and abroad, who would have been impacted in some way or the other by the news of this most recent development.

We are all aware of the deteriorating circumstances in Syria and I know that it is painful and indeed heart wrenching to see the impact of the current practices and policies of the administration there. I do hereby apologize to all adversely impacted by said developments, especially where such discomfort would have been aggravated by the action of our serving Head of Mission in New York.

Such actions did not reflect the policy, thinking or attitude of the government and people of Dominica to the atrocities that are taking place in that country. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the majority of member states of the

United Nations, in condemning civil, social, economic and political developments in Syria.

Here in Dominica, it is unfortunate that as usual, some of us saw the need to carry this slip-up to unimaginable levels of raw partisan politics.

I am still at a loss to understand how this clear lapse in judgement could have been associated in any way to the management of our Citizenship by Investment Program.

Some persons appear so bent on undermining global confidence in and ultimately the destruction of our CBI program that they would seize every opportunity to bring it into global disrepute. I again warn this country that especially as we are still in the throes of a life-altering pandemic, that we do ourselves a serious disservice by constantly chopping at the limb on which we stand.

Several other sectors of the economy of Dominica are slowly re-emerging but they are not there yet. The CBI program is playing a very, very major role in our societal survival. Let no one be in doubt about this!

If we continue to beat up on the one reliable sector that has sustained us through the worst natural disasters and also through global developments such as the COVID- 19 pandemic, then I warn this country again that the ill-wind we sow against CBI can and will one day become a whirlwind of adversity that will negatively impact the lives of the most vulnerable in our midst.

The matter of the establishment of relations with Syria was a lapse of judgement on the part of an individual and it has now been dealt with in a manner universally followed and accepted.

The concerns we all must have now is the growing impact of these persistent attempts to undermine and weaken the integrity of the single largest money earner in our country.

It would be a tragedy if one day the impact of these constant unwarranted attacks result in the strangulation and cessation of an initiative that has done so much to impact and improve the lives and livelihoods of so many in our country.

I appeal once again for reason and good judgement. I appeal also for those who apparently long to see the collapse of the CBI to ponder for a moment, the source of the magic wand that would overnight replace this initiative and guarantee Dominicans an affordable existence, particularly as it strives with the rest of the world to emerge from the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing global events, not least of which is the escalating war over the future of Ukraine.

This is a time for us all to put the interest of Dominica first and foremost in our thoughts, words and actions.

I thank you.