

Statement to the Senate by
Senator the Honourable Kamina Johnson Smith
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade
on -Deliberations within the OAS on the situation in Venezuela

Mr. President,

In the last two months, we have witnessed the continued deterioration of the situation in Venezuela, with increasing violence, loss of life and damage to private and public property, severe economic hardships being experienced by the people, and a hardening of deeply entrenched positions between the Government and Opposition forces.

The situation continues to occupy the minds of Government leaders and foreign policy practitioners in the region and has placed Jamaica's international relations and our foreign policy in the spotlight, both nationally and regionally.

There have been questions raised about Jamaica's response and participation at meetings at the OAS, where discussions have been taking place on the options available to arrive at a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Venezuela. This is a process which requires careful deliberation and consideration given the many sensitivities of the subject.

As an active member of the OAS, and one which takes its international responsibility seriously, Jamaica will continue to attend meetings of the OAS in order to obtain accurate information, to properly assess any given situation and to make its contribution to the formulation of well-informed decisions. There

should be no misunderstanding regarding the justification for attendance at these meetings as Jamaica fulfills its obligations in trying to find a diplomatic and helpful solution to the crisis in Venezuela. We have been present at meetings of the OAS Permanent Council to hear presentations from other member states, including Venezuela, on developments in that country.

As a small country, the multilateral system is essential for safeguarding our interest. The OAS as an institution for deliberation and discussion, should therefore be supported in this regard. The OAS Charter makes provisions 'to consider problems of an urgent nature and of common interest to the American States'. We are of the view that when questions arise regarding the essential elements of democracy such as the separation of powers, periodic, free and fair elections, access to and exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law, then the OAS is the appropriate forum for deliberations on such matters, in order to help to peacefully resolve the situation. There should be no disagreement that the OAS has been assigned this role by our respective countries and should be allowed to play its part.

Let me be very clear that Jamaica does not support the unauthorized and adverse utterances of the OAS Secretary General on the situation in Venezuela and in relation to the Government of Venezuela. These comments have not been helpful in achieving a peaceful resolution of the current situation, and we have stated our position on this in more than one forum.

Mr President,

I wish to make special reference to the Special Meeting of the OAS Permanent Council, held on Monday 3rd April 2017, in respect of which it has been suggested in the public that Jamaica “voted against” Venezuela. The meeting provided an opportunity to discuss the situation in Venezuela and was convened by the then Chair, Belize, at the request of 20 Member States, including Jamaica. It was called around the time of the actions taken by the Supreme Court of Venezuela to arrogate unto itself the powers of the National Assembly, and the removal of parliamentary immunity from Opposition Members of Parliament. A draft resolution was prepared by some of these member states on the developments in Venezuela and was distributed along with the convocation notice for the meeting.

The majority of the countries requesting the Permanent Council meeting were in attendance. Jamaica, Barbados, St. Lucia, Guyana, The Bahamas and Belize were the CARICOM countries which attended.

The draft resolution in question was adopted in the normal course, without a vote, although four countries (El Salvador, Dominican Republic, The Bahamas and Belize) asked that the record reflect abstentions, as they neither objected to, nor supported the resolution.

Jamaica supported the resolution convinced that the process was valid and legal, that the resolution had the support of the majority of countries, was consistent with the principles enshrined in the Democratic Charter, and did not contravene any rules pertaining to procedures at the OAS.

Let me underscore that the position taken by Jamaica should not be considered a “vote against” Venezuela but part of its duty as a responsible member of the OAS, and in accordance with the principles adhered to by members the organization, to participate in dialogue to promote a peaceful and democratic resolution to the crisis facing Venezuela. We would be reneging on our duty as members of the inter-american community, of which Venezuela is a part, were we to remain silent in the face of the continued deterioration of the social and political climate in Venezuela.

While there are differing views among CARICOM Member States, at our recent COFCOR Meeting in Barbados, we were united in our view that respect for certain fundamental values and principles, including the maintenance of the rule of law, respect for human rights and democracy, as well as non-intervention in the internal affairs of states, were valuable and pertinent in addressing the grave concerns we have about the situation in Venezuela. We were all in favour of dialogue and rejected any attempt at international isolation of Venezuela. For Jamaica, as for CARICOM, and for other OAS member states, suspension of Venezuela from the OAS was not an option, and it is therefore, regrettable that Venezuela has decided to withdraw from membership of the OAS.

Mr. President,

In this context, Jamaica will continue to attend meetings of the OAS, and to consult with member states so as to make our contribution to the formulation of well-informed decisions. I will be attending a Consultative Meeting of Foreign

Ministers to consider the situation in Venezuela on Wednesday 31st May 2017 at OAS Headquarters in Washington D.C. where member states will consider options available to assist in the resolution of Venezuela's grave challenges and the growing humanitarian crisis that attends those challenges. This is in the interest of the Venezuelan people.