

2023 Prime Minister's New Year's Message
Most Honourable Andrew Holness ON, PC, MP

We give God thanks for sparing our lives to see 2023, and we give thanks for the lives of loved ones and other great Jamaicans who transitioned last year. We embrace the New Year with optimism and positive energy, knowing that our earnest efforts will determine the success we make of the time given to us.

We have been earnest in our efforts in the past year in controlling crime, particularly murders, and improving public order. It cannot be disputed that Jamaica has an epidemic of violence, which results in intentional killings. Guns are the main enabling weapons used by violence producers, and ease of access to guns of itself extensifies fatal violence. Last year, we took a major step in deterring the procurement, possession, trafficking, and use of guns by passing a new Firearms Act which has totally transformed the legislative framework around legal and illegal guns in Jamaica. It is now a minimum 15 years to life for a person convicted of an illegal gun offense. Since the coming into force of the new Firearms Act on the 1st of November 2022 last year, over 70 persons, that is a rate of one person per day, mostly young men between 16 and 30, are being charged with offenses relating to illegal guns. The security forces are increasing their surveillance, intelligence, and operational capabilities to detect and recover illegal firearms and those using or possessing them. This means that the rate of arrest for illegal firearm offenses will increase. I want to take this opportunity to appeal to our young men who are both the perpetrators of gun crime and the victims of gun crimes, to turn away from guns, avoid persons who you know have guns or have dealings with guns. The probability of you being arrested and taken out of society for at least 15 years is increasing daily. Throw away the gun, don't throw away your life. In the next few months, we will take amendments to Parliament to significantly increase the penalty for murder to over 30 years, we will streamline the bail process with passage of a new Bail Act, a new Corrections Bill will be tabled, a Fingerprint bill will be tabled, and an Enhanced Security Measures Bill will be tabled as well. This year, a clear message will be sent to violence producers that law enforcement and the criminal justice system is not a revolving door. Criminals will begin to understand that we are changing the risk-reward dynamic of crime in Jamaica. The probability of being caught is great, the penalty for crimes is high, and the opportunities and loopholes to escape justice are being closed. Already we are seeing the impact of the use of emergency powers, the new Firearms Act, and various joint enforcement operations, on murder numbers. We were able to reduce the number of murders and save more lives in November and December 2022 thereby significantly bringing down the murder rate at the end of 2022. Your government is steadily building out the legal framework that is appropriate to treat with those determined to perpetuate violence in our society.

I should also mention that the new Road Traffic Act will come into effect on February 1, 2023. This will go a far way in bringing order to our roadways. Motorists are encouraged to address their outstanding tickets at the courts before the new law takes effect. Motorcyclists are both a significant cause and victim of road crashes. The new law makes it mandatory that all riders and pillionists must wear a helmet and that motorbikes must be sold with helmets. The capability of the police to issue electronic tickets will more than double with the arrival of e-ticketing devices in the next few weeks. Under this new system warrants will be issued in a seamless and timely manner. Traffic violators will no longer be able to ignore tickets they have accumulated and continue to drive recklessly without consequences.

2023 is the year when Jamaica will start to see a sustained reduction in violent crimes, particularly murders, and see an increase in public order and safety as well.

As we bid farewell to 2022 and welcome the dawn of the New Year 2023, there are many things of which we as a nation can be proud and many things for which we must be thankful.

Jamaica has staged a remarkable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic despite the global economic shock from the war in Ukraine, continuing supply chain bottlenecks, and inflation. Consider these facts:

- Our economic output is now higher than pre-COVID levels,
- We are experiencing record low unemployment,
- Business and consumer confidence is high, and
- We are seeing an unprecedented level of investor interest in Jamaica, in areas such as tourism, energy, housing, logistics and infrastructure.

We can be particularly proud that we have achieved this economic recovery while remaining steadfast on the path of prudent and responsible fiscal management. We are now cited as a poster child for good fiscal management and are among only a few countries globally that have achieved a robust economic recovery while at the same time managing to reduce debt to below pre-pandemic levels. This is the return on our decade-long investment in building a robust, prudent, and resilient fiscal and monetary system. It is a strong testament to how far we have come as a nation in our quest to achieve economic independence in our 60 years after achieving political independence.

Our relentless focus on economic recovery over the past two years has no doubt been very successful. However, it has unavoidably resulted in diversion of resources and focus from other critical areas such as secondary road repairs and municipal waste collection. Rest assured however, that your government is redoubling efforts in these areas. Already we have been making up lost ground with 50 new garbage trucks commissioned into operations which are improving garbage collection across Jamaica. Our efforts in keeping Jamaica clean are not only centred on collection. Your government undertook a comprehensive study of waste disposal and management in Jamaica, followed a process of developing an end-to-end solution to transform waste management, in keeping with the principles of reducing climate impact, preserving water assets, diversifying our energy sources, creating economic opportunities from recycling, and maintaining the beauty of our environment. We are far advanced with the development of a business case for an Integrated Waste Management solution that will involve a new sanitary landfill to replace Riverton, divested municipal waste collection and management, and a Waste-to-Energy plant. The solution will be implemented through a public-private partnership and aspects of the plan will begin to manifest in this year. Keeping our towns and cities clean has been a challenge for Jamaica for decades. 2023 will be the year when we begin to implement the total transformation of municipal waste disposal and management.

There is sometimes a sense in our discourse that the problem is caused by the government and the solution lies with the government only, while citizens bear no responsibility. The ultimate transformation of our municipal waste system requires behaviour change on the part of the citizens. Litterers and polluters must pay. Later this year the government will pass legislation to increase the fines for illegal and improper disposal of municipal waste, and a bill will be tabled requiring citizens to separate their garbage. However, the Cabinet has already decided that a policy directive will be issued shortly to all government entities, requiring them to institute measures for the separation of the waste they generate. This will include all schools and hospitals.

In 2023, we will turn focus on secondary, community and rural road repairs. Last year, your government made a special allocation of over JA\$3 billion towards repairing secondary roads. You should start to see the effects in communities across Jamaica. While the allocation is significant, it is a drop in the bucket for what is needed to repair all our roads, the vast majority of which have not had routine maintenance and would be at the end of their design life. In the next financial year more focus will be given to these secondary roads and rural roads. However, we must also have a national conversation about the spatial development of Jamaica and where and how we chose to live. It is not economically possible, neither is it practical or desirable given climate change, population shifts and location of industrial clusters, that demands be placed on the national budget to build and

2023 Prime Minister's New Year's Message
Most Honourable Andrew Holness ON, PC, MP

maintain roads and other infrastructure which are not sustainable. Later this year we will confirm the new development order for the corporate area and announce plans to redevelop town centres in all parishes to rationalize settlement in Jamaica in an orderly, sustainable, and resilient manner.

As we recover from the pandemic and return to normalcy, let us not abandon caution as there is always a lingering threat or consideration of a spike in Covid cases or some new virus emerging. The two-year disruption in routine has had untold and yet to be understood impacts on mental and physical health and social behaviours. And this year I urge my Jamaican brothers and sisters to pay attention to your mental health. Don't be afraid to seek help if you find yourself overwhelmed, depressed, unable to cope or just angry. Talk to someone. We Jamaicans tend to think of ourselves as tough, tallawah, able to take on and defeat challenges greater than ourselves. However, over time this tough attitude has led to an ineffective response to personal and social trauma in our lives. We have become a harsh society and it is reflecting in our culture, in our parenting, in our domestic and intimate dealings. Violence has become a normalized response in our interactions as a people. We can change this by making a resolution this year to be gentler with one another, kinder to each other, more forgiving and more loving.

We welcome 2023 and thank Almighty God for all his blessings and for shepherding Jamaica through a very challenging 2022. We look forward to all the opportunities the New Year presents with a spirit of hope, optimism, determination and faith. Hardships there are, but the land is green and the sun shineth. I wish for all Jamaicans, a happy, healthy, safe and prosperous 2023. God Bless You and God Bless Jamaica.