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## NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE 2023

From Leader of the Opposition

Mark Golding

To all Jamaicans, at home and in the diaspora, I wish you a Happy New Year.

For many people, the celebration of a new year is a symbol of hope for our future. The start of a new year is an opportunity to focus on what lies ahead, while taking into account the year we have just gone through, and where we are today.

2022 was a very difficult year for many Jamaicans. Our people have endured a major spike in the cost of living, without much help to cushion the crisis. We have seen levels of violent crime that have us living in fear and sap the hope of our people. We experienced restive months in recent times, with the uncertainties among our public sector workers as to their pay arrangements.

Repeated States of Public Emergency have been declared across various parishes, as the Government uses these State of Emergency as an ongoing crime fighting strategy. This has been going on for five years now, but the murder rate in the country has continued to rise.

Under the Constitution, a State of Emergency is intended to be the last resort mechanism to protect the State from subversion. By allowing extended

periods of detention of any person without charge or access to the courts, a State of Emergency suspends many of the most fundamental rights and freedoms of our citizens.

The Supreme Court has on two occasions ruled against the Government in their recent use of the SOEs, and the Government's appeals of those rulings have not yet been heard by the Court of Appeal. With this pall of constitutional doubt hanging over the Government's use of States of Emergency, it has been my solemn duty not to support any extensions of these States of Emergency when they are brought to Parliament.

Jamaica needs a strategy which does not violate the Constitution; one which tackles the root causes of the problem in a way which can be supported by all well-thinking Jamaicans, including the Opposition.

It is my hope for 2023, that the Government will embrace a more collaborative approach to address the issue of crime. Jamaica needs a balanced approach to our national security crisis, using both tactical law enforcement and well-designed social intervention.

The police have said that there are approximately 300 violence producers. If that is so, our efforts should be geared towards urgently putting in place a legal procedure for targeting them, without infringing on the basic rights of millions of ordinary Jamaicans.

I have therefore suggested a court-supervised system of detention of these known violence producers, while cases are built so that they can be charged and brought to justice. I have offered my services to the Government to

develop the legislation to implement this much-needed procedure as quickly as possible.

I have also, on many occasions, made the recommendation that the Zones of Special Operations legislation be employed more widely, to provide security in the form of a strong presence of police and soldiers on the ground in communities plagued by high levels of violent crime. This is what people want to see, and it does not require a State of Emergency for this to happen.

These security measures must be supported by programmes to provide positive pathways and opportunities for our youths-at-risk, and must include mechanisms to foster conflict resolution and avoid a spiral of reprisals.

It saddens me that important and proven intervention programmes, like the Peace Management Initiative (PMI) and Unite for Change, have been discontinued, and nothing has been put in their place. We commend the Private Sector for recently launching Project Star in an effort to fill this gap; however, it is limited in scope, and will not reach most of the communities which need to be stabilised.

We also need to prioritise programmes that reaffirm the positive values and attitudes on which a strong nation can be built. We need to invest in early childhood development, by providing support for weak family structures and the raising of children in vulnerable households.

We must raise the minimum wage and make it a liveable wage, so that parents can support their families without enduring the deprivations of poverty.

We cannot allow the crisis in our education system to continue. Our schools lack basic infrastructure and resources to enhance the learning experience of students. Hundreds of students are still suffering from learning loss due to the pandemic, some of whom have not been able to return to school.

We must invest raising standards in basic and primary schools across the board, so that they become world class. This will plug the pipeline of youths who have been failed and abandoned by the system and end up embracing a culture of violence and wreaking havoc on our society.

In 2022, we witnessed unrest and demonstrations within the public sector. The smooth rollout of the major restructuring of salaries and benefits in the public sector has been undermined and confused by misleading communications when it comes to sensitive issues like the future of the motor vehicle concession policy, the recovery of discontinued allowances that have already been paid since April 1st, and the payment of annual increments over the three-year period.

Civil servants are the backbone of our public systems. They deserve to be adequately compensated for the work that they do, and our national development goals require a competent and motivated public sector.

I urge the Government to level in clear terms with the public sector workers and their unions on all the outstanding issues, and not to obscure the situation by resorting to clever or complex language that is easily misunderstood. The principles of transparency and equity and transparency must be reflected in the process and outcomes of the negotiations.

In 2022, we celebrated our 60th Anniversary of political independence from colonial rule, yet we are going into 2023 and the Queen remains our head of state, and the Privy Council remains our final appellate court. Let us not pay lip service to these issues of national importance. Time come for Jamaica to be truly independent. We must decolonize these remaining aspects of our governance, by acceding to the Caribbean court of Justice as our final court of appeal, and becoming a republic with a Jamaican as our head of state.

2022 was a year of dwindling trust and confidence in the governance of our nation. People are sick and tired of public resources being used for the enrichment of a select few who are politically connected to the powers that be, instead of for the people for whom it is intended.

Global inflation is now raging, and interest rates continue to increase as central banks seek to control it. Prices of basic food items and utilities have gone up while our purchasing power continues to decline. People are struggling to make ends meet, and survival is a daily grind in Jamaica.

We must respect the remarkable strength and resilience of the Jamaican people. I know it is hard, but I encourage you to keep the faith. Weeping may endure in these hard times but, as sure as the sun shineth, joy will come in the morning.

The tide is turning, slowly but surely. Jamaicans are becoming increasingly aware of those who have their best interest at heart, and those who do not. Time come for us to put people at the centre of governance by developing policies geared towards social inclusion, equality, and a better quality of life for all Jamaicans. Time come for us to return power to the people, so that we can collectively make the Jamaican dream a reality for all Jamaicans.

In 2023, let us recommit to upholding the values and principles of integrity on which our great nation was founded.

Happy New Year Jamaica. May God bless you all, and bless Jamaica land we love.