

Prime Minister's New Year's Message 2024

God has given us the opportunity to see the sun rise on a New Year. Let us rejoice with gratitude and embrace the 2024 canvas of possibilities; to paint new and better pictures for our future with vibrant colors of our Jamaican creativity, dreams, and aspirations, or complete the masterpieces we have started with optimism and determination.

Building Peace

We will continue to build out our plan to sustainably secure Jamaica. The new Firearms Act, Bail Act, and amendments to the Offenses Against the Person Act to create realistic deterrent penalties, along with usage of the Anti-gang Law, and improved intelligence and policing operations, are having strong impact on reducing crime overall. Already, we are seeing about 7.5% percent reduction in murders, that is approximately 120 lives saved. And serious crimes are down 10% overall, in fact the total number of reported serious crimes, (murder, shooting, rape, robbery, break-in), is the lowest in 20 years.

The intentional taking of a life is the ultimate violence. Since 1997, Jamaica passed the 1,000-murder mark, and has remained above that mark for 23 years at three times the regional average. Separate from crime problem, Jamaica has a violence problem. While the two are linked social phenomena, differentiated strategies must be developed to treat with them. Violence has a significant public health and human services element, over and above the law enforcement and security dimensions of the problem. In 2024, your government will begin the build-out of a comprehensive social services response to violence, which will include:

- education and youth services,
- faith-based and NGO social partnership initiatives to promote truth, reconciliation, and restorative justice for building peace in communities,
- social safety net support targeted at those most at risk and vulnerable to violence,
- public health intervention and treatment services, and
- targeted media and public education campaign, among other initiatives.

So in 2024 my administration will turn the machinery and resources of government to focus on reducing violence, building our socio-emotional intelligence and human capital, strengthening our families, and promoting peace in our land.

Roads and Traffic

Last year, road conditions, traffic, and public order featured as a pain point for the commuting public; this despite the record number of roads being repaired and highways being built. We opened the May Pen to Williamsfield leg of the East-West Highway, and many Jamaicans were able to experience the convenience of the well-built road without charge. I am sure you are happy to know that the period to use the road toll free will be extended to March 31, 2024. You will also be happy to know that plans are already in place to extend this highway to bypass Spur Tree. And work is already underway on the Montego Bay Perimeter Road which is a multi-year project that will transform road and traffic conditions in St. James and Westmoreland.

Early this year, we will open the dualized highway from Harbour View heading to Morant Bay along with several segments heading to Port Antonio with improved water mains, broadband internet, and sewerage in some instances. We will begin work on Grange Lane in Portmore along with a new entrance to Portmore, which will ease traffic conditions on the Mandela Highway. We will begin work to widen the bridge on Washington Boulevard and work is far advanced on improvements to Tom Redcam Boulevard and Lady Musgrave Road which will improve traffic flows in Kingston.

You may have noticed that we are laying conduits and fibre optic cables to create a highspeed network, Govnet, which is the backbone on which smart technology can be deployed. As a result, you will begin to see more cameras, both for law enforcement under Jamaica Eye, and traffic management under the NWA. The new Road Traffic Act and the electronic ticketing system will begin to have a significant effect on improving behaviour on our roadways.

There has not been a comprehensive and sustained programme of road repairs and maintenance, possibly since the 1960s. Of the approximately 22,000 km of roadways in Jamaica, it is assessed that about 50% are in less than suitable driving condition or in need of total rehabilitation. Obviously, we cannot repair and rehabilitate 11,000km of road in a year, but we must begin to address this decades' long neglect. In 2024, your government will begin a direct focus on repairing local and community roads through a JA\$20 billion Budget allocation. Your elected representatives will be tasked to hold community consultations to determine the first set of roads to be repaired and rehabilitated from this allocation. Instead of protests and demonstrations over road conditions, we believe the Jamaica people should be given the forum and listening ear where their voice and concerns can be heard and you can have a say in the repair of your roads.

More from Tourism 2024

Jamaica's tourism industry continues to be a powerful catalyst for social and economic transformation of the lives of the Jamaican people and local businesses. The

interconnected web of the tourism value chain has great potential for expansion and deeper integration into the wider economy. Already transactions through the Agri-Linkages Exchange (ALEX) platform, a collaborative initiative between the Tourism Enhancement Fund (TEF) and the Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA), have generated over \$1 billion in sales by small farmers to local hotels and restaurants. I have tasked the Minister of Tourism and the Minister of Investment and Commerce to increase structured linkages efforts through platforms such as ALEX, between Tourism and all areas of the Jamaican economy with a view doubling the locally-sourced content in the Tourism industry.

Tourism has always been a major employer of labour, and historically, we have built hotel rooms, but no planned housing and accommodations for the workers in the industry. We are now seeing the limiting impact of unplanned developments on the tourism product. In 2024, we will launch a national policy to build homes for tourism workers in partnership with the hotels. The Ministry of Tourism has already entered into partnerships with the Housing

Agency of Jamaica, the National Housing Trust and private housing developers for units in Rhyne Park Estate and Grange Pen, St. James, to be acquired by our hard-working tourism workers. We also welcome the pledge by four major international hotel investor groups, including RCD Hotels, Bahia Principe and Princess Resorts, who have committed to constructing over 2,000 residential units for industry employees combined. As our Tourism industry expands, we must ensure that the people get more of the benefits and that we take a longer and more sustainable view of the projects. We will not only build hotels, but we will build the community around them,

Healthcare

The challenges to repair the Cornwall Regional Hospital tell the story of Jamaican infrastructure. The Cornwall Regional Hospital was built over 50 years ago, and did not undergo any major maintenance programme since this Administration decided to rehabilitate the building to extend its useful life. The facility is now close to completion and will significantly improve healthcare in the northwestern region of Jamaica, particularly when the adjoining Western

Children and Adolescents Hospital is complete. This year we will break ground for the expansion and refurbishing of the Spanish Town Hospital which, when completed, will improve healthcare to the people of St. Catherine. This year we will go to procurement to build the most advanced primary care clinics in Portmore and Old Harbour. We have started the digitization of our health information systems and the May Pen Hospital will be the first facility to go live on this digital health information system.

All ministries, department and agencies of your government have transformational projects, in development, currently being executed or about to be implemented. I can only mention a few of these projects here, but permit me to also mention that early this year we will break ground for the Resilience Park in Portmore. This will be a major investment in recreational and urban environmental public space, equivalent to Emancipation Park in Kingston and Harmony Park in Montego Bay.

The Economy

We have been able to undertake these transformational projects and recover strongly from the Pandemic, because we have been good stewards of the economy. Our economy has recorded:

- Ten consecutive quarters of positive economic growth since the pandemic.
- A record low unemployment rate (4.5%).
- Net international reserves at US\$4.5 Billion as of November 2023.
- A remarkable 55% increase in export earnings for the first quarter of 2023.
- A projected debt-to-GDP ratio of approximately 74% by the end of this fiscal year.

This year the economic focus will be on increasing economic growth by increasing productivity. All Jamaica must produce more in 2024. We will be seeking to gain greater efficiencies in service delivery and output through greater integration of technology and business process engineering in the public service. Performance management must become the mantra for all Jamaica as this is how we will sustain our economic growth.

I urge Jamaicans not to undervalue the importance of a strongly performing economy. There are those who will seek to create social strife and divide the country by promoting the false idea that economic growth and development will benefit only some persons, social class or region. As we face a New Year with new opportunities and decisions, let us reflect on the fact that, when our economy was underperforming we could not fix our roads, hospitals, water supply, or pay our public sector workers close to market wages as we have done under the Compensation Review.

I am student of history, and I am very sensitive to the historic injustices and inequalities of our society. I understand the long struggle of the poor and dispossessed, and the unfulfilled promises which have jaded our outlook. I want to assure that the government I lead is committed to ensuring that the benefits of a growing economy reach the people in a fair and just way. We believe in prosperity for all. That is why we doubled the minimum wage; that is why we engage young people in programmes to develop work readiness, like the LIFT programme; that is why we introduced the social pension for elderly persons not

covered in the social safety net; that is why we introduced programmes to assist persons who have lost limbs due to lifestyle diseases; that is why we have developed the social housing programme to provide housing to the poorest in our society, along with many other programmes specifically targeted those in our society who cannot participate in the economy through employment and income. No one will be left behind.

So in 2024, we will further expand economic activity and make the necessary investments in human capital and security to support economic expansion. This will give us the ability to do more for you in 2024.

Happy New Year my Jamaican family! May this year be everything you hoped for, may God bless and expand your plans; may you step out in faith as we commit to being a nation at peace, harmony, and social and economic stability.

I love each and every one of you with all my heart, God bless you and may love and light be yours for 2024.