



MINISTRY OF NATIONAL SECURITY

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MEDIA RELEASE

GOVERNMENT CLARIFIES INFORMATION ON ASYLUM SEEKERS

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The Government of Trinidad and Tobago respects the rights of any person to seek asylum in Trinidad and Tobago and the decision of any foreign national to voluntarily return to their country of nationality.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago also has a right to repatriate any foreign national who is found to be in breach of the laws of Trinidad and Tobago and will take the necessary steps to ensure repatriation. To this end the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the Government of Venezuela have been engaged in discussions to reduce the length of detention for those Venezuelan nationals in breach of the laws of Trinidad and Tobago and to repatriate them to their homeland as soon as practicable.

Following revelations by the Chief Immigration Officer at a Joint Select Committee of Parliament on April 6th 2018, that 89 Venezuelan nationals were detained for various offences at the Immigration Detention Centre (IDC), officials from the Venezuelan Embassy visited the nationals detained at the IDC on Friday April 13th 2018 to ascertain their well-being and identify their needs for repatriation. Subsequently, at the request of the Venezuelan Ambassador, a meeting was held between the Ministry of National Security and the Venezuelan Embassy on Tuesday April 17th, 2018 to discuss the situation.

The Venezuelan Ambassador stated that her fellow citizens expressed a desire to return to Venezuela and she had assured them that the Government of Venezuela would do everything possible to assist them in returning home. The Minister of National Security also gave the assurance that his Ministry would work with the Embassy to facilitate the repatriation.

On Friday April 20th 2018, at the request of the Venezuelan Embassy, the Immigration Division facilitated all Venezuelan nationals in detention who agreed to go to their Embassy to obtain travel documents to return to Venezuela; 102 persons were transported to the Embassy. None of the nationals expressed fear or objection to be taken to the Embassy. The detainees were informed by the Venezuelan officials that a plane would be sent from Venezuela to take them home on Saturday April 21st 2018. At the same time, a diplomatic note was sent to the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs seeking permission to land a Venezuelan aircraft to specifically repatriate Venezuelan citizens detained at the Immigration Detention Centre.

On Saturday April 21st 2018, through the collaborative effort of the Ministry of National Security and the Venezuelan Embassy, a Venezuelan military aircraft landed at Piarco International Airport to effect the repatriation. Eighty-two (82) Venezuelan nationals comprising 53 men and 29 women voluntarily left the Immigration Detention Centre with Detention and Immigration Officers to be repatriated to their homeland. Nineteen (19) of the one hundred and two (102) could not be repatriated as warrants have been issued for them to serve varying terms of imprisonment in Trinidad and Tobago, having been convicted for various offences.

At the Airport, each person was asked if they had any fear or objection to returning to their homeland - all stated that they wanted to leave. Each signed the necessary documents for their departure before being handed their travel document by Immigration Officers and having their personal property checked by Customs officials. Prior to boarding the aircraft, each individual was again asked by a different set of officials if they had any fear of returning to their homeland; each again responded in the negative and willingly boarded a bus with their belongings to be taken to the aircraft. No one was forced or coerced to leave the IDC, board the bus or the aircraft. The entire exercise was recorded by the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has been collaborating with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to ensure the protection of persons fleeing persecution and will continue to support the work of the UNHCR while maintaining law and order and national security interests of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Immigration Division has received reports that foreign nationals have been entering the country and are being required to pay a fee to facilitate a claim for asylum, even though they are not entering the country as refugees. Further reports to the Immigration Division allege that these foreigners are being advised that that they cannot be 'touched by Immigration' once they receive an Asylum Seeker Certificate and that they can live and work freely in Trinidad and Tobago even though they do not have the requisite legal documents. These allegations are being investigated by the appropriate agencies.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is concerned that many foreigners have entered the country illegally or have overstayed the landing permission granted to them by the Immigration Division and, as a result, may become susceptible to exploitation because of their irregular immigration status. These breaches of national security will not be tolerated by this Government and every effort will be taken to prevent exploitation of foreign nationals, while at the same time, we continue to protect this country's borders.

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