



Communication On Tourism Travel Advisory Update

**The Honourable I. Chester Cooper, MP
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Tourism,
Investments, & Aviation**

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[Speech length: 22.1 mins/2877 words]

Madame Speaker,

It is my pleasure to stand here today to represent the resilient people of the Exumas and Ragged Island.

I am also honored to stand before you today as your deputy prime minister and minister of tourism, investments, and aviation to update you on our tourism industry and the media coverage The Bahamas recently received as a result of the updated US travel advisory.

As you would no doubt know, on January 26, the U.S. Department of State re-stated a "Level 2" Travel Advisory for The Bahamas asking travelers to exercise precaution. This Level 2 is not new, it has been in place for many years, and a great many popular tourist destinations share this Level 2 designation.

The State Department advisory pointed to a wave of crime in the country, mainly the homicides in non-tourist areas of New Providence during the month of January.

Prime Minister Davis issued an official statement on behalf of our government and country, assuring visitors that The Bahamas remains a safe destination for tourists.

We renew that message today!

And it is a message I am happy to report has been echoed by many of our visitors themselves – and indeed, our January 2024 arrival numbers exceeded January 2023 arrivals.

Now, unfortunately, earlier this month, two American tourists claimed that they were sexually assaulted in Freeport. The Royal Bahamas Police Force issued a statement on February 7 confirming that they were investigating the matter along with assistance from the FBI.

Many Bahamians have taken great interest in the press reports which indicate that the property's surveillance footage contradicts the allegations, but I want to be clear that it's important for the full and fair investigation to take place so the facts can be established in an orderly fashion.

When I spoke in this place after the issuance of the Travel Advisory, I assured you that we would pull out all the stops to address the concerns of potential visitors,

in order to mitigate the impact of the warning, and that we would do so in a calm, deliberate and sober manner.

That is what we have done, and that is what we are continuing to do.

And before I detail the many ways in which we are working to make sure 2024 is a big success, I want to thank my terrific team at Tourism – we have all been working around the clock on this issue. I also want to thank our stakeholders and Director General Duncombe, for active engagement with our partners, including the promotion boards.

Central to shaping an effective response is collecting data from various information streams, to understand the scope and nature of the impact. We are monitoring communications channels throughout the globe, using state-of-the-art artificial intelligence, along with analytics from our domestic and global partners, with assistance from our international PR agencies and professional crises management experts.

Our comprehensive analysis has unearthed important insights, offering us a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play in the wake of this advisory, and allowing us to create a targeted strategy, which is already beginning to work, although there is of course, much work ahead.

It's important to remember that we are practiced at using the most modern analytical tools and have already used them to great effect. In 2023, we executed a holistic strategy that included travel missions to more than 15 major cities in Canada, the United States, and other markets, showcasing our 16 major tourist destinations in The Bahamas.

So, our current efforts are building on previous success -- indeed, we welcomed more than 9 million visitors to our shores last year.

I am very pleased to report that what we are learning now is that, despite some negative impacts which we take seriously and must address, our tourism brand continues to be robust and resilient.

While there were two separate, very significant spikes of negative press coverage and social media, following the State Department news and then the assault allegations, both the press coverage and social media engagement fell quickly after each spike. By February 7th, overall coverage had returned nearly to pre-advisory levels.

To contextualize, we saw thousands of interactions regarding The Bahamas on various media platforms peaking around January 29, with a slowdown to

hundreds of mentions by February 7TH with the vast majority being neutral or positive.

One interesting data finding is that the coverage and discussion of the advisory in The Bahamas was in many instances intertwined with coverage of the US Travel Warning about Jamaica.

The level of engagement online and through news outlets globally for Jamaica surpassed that of The Bahamas by 43 percent.

As I said earlier, most tourist destinations carry at least a level 2 USA advisory, as we do, which indicates that the US government advises visitors take precautions, but Jamaica is at Level 3, which means that the U.S. State Department advises its citizens to reconsider travel to the destination.

We are aware that heightened concerns about a regional neighbor can affect perceptions about safety throughout the region.

This is why we have spent a lot of time seeking to educate international partners, media, and travel audiences, emphasizing that we are a distinct archipelago of 700 islands within the broader Caribbean region.

Although any negative coverage of our country is distressing and something we take seriously, I want to note that our analytics indicate that only 8 percent of

online coverage of The Bahamas over the relevant time period was focused on crime. These negative stories were disseminated against a backdrop of stories featuring either positive or neutral coverage.

This challenges and puts to rest the prevailing notion that crime dominates the overarching narrative of our nation in the wake of the advisory.

We do not minimize the need to address the crime issue, as evidenced by the crime plan articulated by the Prime Minister and the great work of the Ministry of National Security and the RBPF.

Let me be clear that we will make the work of the MOT exceedingly easier by breaking this wave of crime.

This is a community problem. The police need everyone's help. I call on all Bahamians to do your part.

But it is important to me to emphasize the reduction in negative coverage, which underscores the need and validates the strategy of making concerted efforts to amplify positive narratives and to counter prevailing misconceptions.

The negative stories are losing momentum, and our efforts to put forward our own positive story are taking effect and will continue.

We are satisfied that our strategy, which reflects significant industry and stakeholder input, is on course, will continue to reverse negative repercussions, and will be part of our larger efforts to achieve success for the industry and the country.

We know that at the beginning of the year, positive interest in The Bahamas was trending up.

We capitalized on the momentum generated by early January's surge, which showcased the excellence of Bahamian tourism through targeted amplification and retargeting initiatives.

Madame Speaker, as we navigate the challenges before us, I wish to share some of the additional proactive measures the Ministry of Tourism and our stakeholders are taking to mitigate fallout and to pave the way for an even brighter future for our tourism industry.

One of our primary initiatives is open communication and collaboration with key stakeholders in the travel industry. It is important for us to be as inclusive as possible, so if you haven't heard from us yet, you will – and feel free to reach out to us, as well.

We are engaging in extensive outreach to wholesalers, tour operators, and consortia, disseminating accurate information to address traveler apprehension.

Through paid ads in trade publications, informative webinars, and in-person meetings with tour operators and distribution partners, we are working diligently to reassure our partners and stakeholders of the safety and allure of The Bahamas as a premier travel destination.

By monitoring bookings, tracking sentiments at trade shows and events, and maintaining weekly stakeholder meetings, we are committed to fostering a supportive and transparent dialogue that builds trust and confidence among industry players.

We have meticulously crafted a marketing strategy aimed at mitigating the impact on our tourism product and national image.

Our goals are to deepen market penetration, promote a reassuring narrative, and amplify The Bahamas brand to a wider audience.

We plan to continue to saturate social media with authentic, positive stories.

We have already begun an international media blitz, and I have appeared on several international travel media programs.

We have shared proactive press releases throughout global tourism networks that shed a positive light on the country.

We have contacted travel publications to share positive stories.

And our content from Visiting Journalist Program trips will be posted and shared.

One core objective is to achieve 50 percent market penetration with our existing TV and video partners.

To achieve this goal, we have strategically increased our media spend across various platforms, ensuring a robust presence in key markets, including television.

Through this allocation of resources, we aim to saturate the airwaves, captivating audiences with the allure of our pristine beaches, vibrant culture, and unparalleled hospitality.

To this end, we will leverage the power of connected TV and cable TV, targeting audiences with a demonstrated interest in travel and a propensity for consuming Caribbean content.

Our strategy is rooted in precision, focusing on key source markets such as Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, Orlando, Los Angeles, Seattle, New York, Orlando, Philadelphia, Washington DC, and Texas.

By aligning our messaging with the interests and aspirations of our target audience, we aim to reaffirm a deep sense of connection and affinity towards The Bahamas.

But our efforts do not stop there.

Recognizing the need to embrace new media partners and innovative approaches, we are poised to expand our reach through out-of-home placements and targeted e-blasts.

Through partnerships and creative execution, we will captivate audiences in high-traffic areas, leaving an indelible impression that resonates long after the initial encounter.

Our partnership with Ink Globals' Reach TV, the world's premier in-airport TV network, will further amplify our message, reaching over 30 million passengers each month across airports that fly to The Bahamas.

Our YouTube strategy represents a pivotal component of our overarching approach, blending prospecting and remarketing initiatives to maximize our impact.

Through branded island spots and targeted placements, we will captivate audiences seeking Caribbean adventures while re-engaging with previous visitors through compelling island-themed content.

By leveraging the power of storytelling and visual imagery, we aim to evoke emotions, stir imaginations, and inspire wanderlust, positioning The Bahamas as the ultimate destination for unforgettable experiences.

But our digital footprint extends beyond YouTube alone.

Recognizing the immense potential of social media platforms in shaping perceptions and influencing behaviors, we are harnessing the power of Facebook and Instagram to reach and engage with our target audience on a deeper level.

Our Global Influencers Campaign represents a major effort to leverage the power of influencers in reshaping perceptions and driving visitation to The Bahamas.

We have conducted outreach to both new and previously engaged influencers and celebrities, targeting key markets such as the United States, Canada, Europe with a focus on Germany, and, of course, The Bahamas itself. We are already reaching millions of potential visitors with this initiative.

Through initiatives such as the "See For Yourself" influencer, media, and travel agent family trips, we are providing firsthand experiences that dispel myths and reinforce the positive attributes of our nation.

With outreach to media and influencers across key US markets such as Florida, Georgia, Carolinas, New York, Texas, and California we are amplifying our message and expanding our reach.

We call on all local social media influencers to get involved in your own authentic way to tell the world that it is still better in the Bahamas.

Through destination activities and targeted engagement, we aim to showcase the beauty, diversity, and safety of The Bahamas, inspiring travelers to experience our nation firsthand.

Our campaigns will also identify frequent international travelers and travelers to the Caribbean, tailoring our messaging to resonate with their interests and aspirations.

We've collaborated with a diverse range of online marketing travel intent partners to ignite enthusiasm for travel to the Bahamas. Among these partners are industry leaders such as Kayak, TripAdvisor, Expedia and Skyscanner, among others.

By fostering meaningful connections and sparking conversations, we will grow the number of visitors who become advocates championing The Bahamas as a safe must-visit destination.

Furthermore, our new partnership with travel metasearch engine Kayak represents an incredible opportunity to leverage email marketing to showcase The Bahamas to a highly engaged audience actively searching for Caribbean vacations.

With its vast user base and robust platform, Kayak provides a gateway to reach millions of potential visitors, enticing them with the promise of sun-kissed beaches, crystal-clear waters, and unforgettable adventures.

We are creating new email newsletters to highlight new offers, upcoming events, hotels, new flights, and things-to-do options on each island. Nassau & Paradise Island was the first email newsletter that was developed and is being finalized.

Email newsletters are currently underway for all 16 island destinations and will be deployed to trade databases with over 1 million subscribers, 1.2 million consumers directly and 50,000 trade partners.

In addition to our digital endeavors, we are poised to capitalize on the power of out-of-home advertising, targeting high household incomes in Miami through large-format advertising, for example billboards in the Downtown Miami /Brickell area where there are high concentrations of our target clients; and also, Brightline trains, Canadian buses and metros, Penn Station and most recently the branding of London Taxis and Double-decker buses.

Our messaging will be placed in key locations frequented by affluent travelers as we aim to elevate awareness and generate excitement about The Bahamas as a premier destination for discerning travelers.

Additionally, our ongoing Tourism is Everybody's Business Campaign, which is being launched this week locally, underscores our collective commitment to promoting The Bahamas as a welcoming and inclusive destination for all. This will include an "I love The Bahamas" campaign starting today.

These campaigns are all designed to run from February through June and will supplement already.

Our marketing strategy represents a holistic approach to reshaping the narrative surrounding The Bahamas, transcending the confines of negative perceptions to unveil the beauty, diversity, and allure of our nation.

Through strategic partnerships, targeted placements, and captivating content, we aim to not only mitigate the impact of crime-related concerns but also position The Bahamas to continue growing.

I would note that since increasing our ad spend, we promoted new digital advertisements on social media and Google Ads. This push allowed us to reach 2.6 million people since launching the last week of January.

This represents a 20 percent increase in audience reach compared to the same period in 2023.

Madame Speaker, we are determined to turn a negative into a positive.

And we are determined that everyone in tourism-related businesses is part of the turnaround. There has been anecdotal data about a drop-off in visitors participating in local activities and some softening in booking trends. We must and will arrest and reverse that.

I want to share that the fruits of our labor are already beginning to manifest, with early indicators pointing towards a promising upward trend in tourism.

We have witnessed an uptick in occupancy projections at our largest resorts in January, February and March compared to the same period in 2023.

Furthermore, the Nassau Cruise Port has experienced an increase in cruise passengers visiting in 2024 compared to January-March 2023, signaling renewed interest and confidence in The Bahamas as a premier cruise destination.

Arrivals at LPIA are reporting double-digit increases in arrivals for January and so far for February.

Forward Keys analytics continue to report strong forward-bookings.

Let me make it clear that we acknowledge some pockets of stakeholders reporting a fall-off in activity and softening of bookings.

We want to re-assure the public that we are working diligently to restimulate interest and redirect traffic with our tourism ambassadors and the Tourism Development Corporation.

Madame Speaker, while the recent travel advisory has undoubtedly posed challenges, it is incumbent upon us to navigate these turbulent waters with grace, resilience, and sobriety.

By amplifying positive narratives, engaging key stakeholders, and leveraging social media effectively, we can chart a course towards a brighter future for Bahamian tourism, one defined by resilience, innovation, and unwavering optimism.

We continue to attract new airlift to The Bahamas:

- American Airlines to Governors Harbor started two times a week two weeks ago but it's been going so well they has already added an additional day.
- Silver Airlines from West Palm Beach to Marsh Harbor 3 times per weekbeing launched March 5th.
- Silver Airways from West Palm Beach to Nassau daily
- American Airlines expanding its number of flights from Dallas to Nassau and Charlotte to Nassau, George Town and North Eleuthera.

We continue to attract new investments to our shores even today. Confidence in our tourism product and in our country remains very strong.

We are resilient people. We are a proud and independent people. We have overcome many obstacles over the past 50 years. We will prevail.

God has been good to us. May he continue to bless the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.