



**UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)
AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)
CARIBBEAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE PROTECTION
OF VULNERABLE PERSONS IN MIXED MIGRATION FLOWS-
PROMOTING COOPERATION AND IDENTIFICATION OF GOOD
PRACTICES**

NASSAU, THE BAHAMAS

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**PANELIST PRESENTATION DELIVERED BY
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SLIDE 1- INTRODUCTION

Good Morning,

I thank you all for participation in this panel discussion, following which I hope will provoke a fruitful dialogue on the Rescue at Sea Operations. Therefore, I am especially pleased to present a synopsis on Rescue at Sea Operations for mixed arrivals in The Bahamas.

SLIDE 2- MAP OF THE BAHAMAS

SLIDE 3- THE BAHAMAS EXPERIENCE

The Bahamas is not a destination for high occurrences of mixed migration flows, as generally, the islands are confronted with large influxes of economic migrants. However, we have experienced instances on a small scale of individuals classified as members of other migrant groups. The islands continue to experience the maritime trend of the smuggling of different groups and nationalities from Caribbean countries. When such instances arise there are plans and procedures in place to ensure that all persons apprehended are treated accordingly and in line with international standards.

SLIDE 4- MIGRANTS MODES OF TRANSPORTATION

There are a variety of transportation methods used to transport irregular migrants to their destination and transit countries, each with varying purposes. Two of the more popular types of vessels used are: the traditional wooden sloop and steel-hull vessels. Both types of vessels pose unique detection challenges to border control agencies, as well as hazards to migrants on board. This is particularly concerning as these modes of travel by sea for migrants are often inadequate, creating the potential for deaths at sea, injuries and malnutrition, as vessels may carry anywhere between 20 to 250 migrants at one time.

SLIDE 5- INTERCEPTIONS IN THE BAHAMAS

Given the geographic location of the majority of countries in the Caribbean relative to The Bahamas, the detection and interception predominantly takes place near the Southern “Family” Islands of The Bahamas, mainly Inagua, Mayaguana and the Exuma chain of islands. As The Bahamas is comprised of 700 islands and cays, it also remains vulnerable to irregular migration through the islands to destination countries. For example, irregular migrants may migrate through the Southern Bahamian islands to Northern Bahamian islands in order to migrate to the United States.

Apprehensions are made by The Royal Bahamas Defence Force. It is also in this context that I mention the assistance by the United States Coast Guard which has been instrumental in assisting with the interceptions of migrants in Bahamian waters.

SLIDE 6- MAP- INTERCEPTION IN THE BAHAMAS

SLIDE 7 – BAHAMAS-USA BILATERAL COMPREHENSIVE MARITIME AGREEMENT

This assistance of the U.S Coast Guard is facilitated by maritime cooperation between the U.S and The Bahamas, in particular, The Bahamas – US Bilateral Comprehensive Maritime Agreement which supplements both human and material resources, permits U.S Coast Guard vessels to patrol the waters of The Bahamas in an effort to increase maritime security between the two Countries.

SLIDE 8- OPERATION BAHAMAS TURKS AND CAICOS (OPBAT)

Another joint cooperation between the two Countries is the Operation Bahamas, Turks and Caicos commonly referred to as OPBAT is a combined unit consisting of the Coast Guard, the Drug Enforcement Unit and The Bahamas. While OPBAT is primarily aimed to facilitate law enforcement cases in the Bahamian area of responsibility, it regularly assist with human smuggling and irregular immigration

detection and interception, and search and rescue cases throughout Bahamian waters and the surrounding high seas.

SLIDE 9- DISEMBARKATION

Migrants apprehended are transported to land and turned over to immigration authorities for processing. This processing includes conducting a medical assessment of the individuals, providing them with sufficient food and water, and obtaining information from them through individual interviews and evaluation forms.

SLIDE 10-SCREENING AND REFERRAL

Bahamian authorities have incorporated a profiling process whereby migrants known to have arrived in The Bahamas illegally from countries that are economically impoverished are interviewed by the immigration officers, while migrants from countries known to generate migrants from other vulnerable groups are automatically turned over to the Refugee Administration Unit for screening.

As a matter of policy, illegal migrants found in The Bahamas are interviewed by appropriately trained personnel from the Department of Immigration. Officers interview these migrants to uncover the reasons why they left their countries. Migrants who disclose fear for his or her life, or fear of persecution upon return to their country are turned over to the Refugee Administration Unit which will conduct a further assessment of the migrants to determine if they meet the criteria for international protection.

Bahamian authorities employ two levels of assessments to determine if persons are in need of international protection. The migrants are first interviewed by a trained officer from the Refugee Administration Unit. The second level of assessment involves a non constituted panel of officers trained on UNHCR standards, who assesses the findings of the first level assessor. The final recommendations are put to the Executive to

ascertain whether The Bahamas will afford the potential asylum seeker protection in The Bahamas or seek other long term solutions. Individuals who do not meet the criteria of political refugee status are repatriated to their country of origin.

SLIDE 11- REFERRAL MECHANISMS

On the recommendation of the panel and the immigration department the Executive is asked to consider granting international protection to individuals on well founded claims of life endangerment upon return to their country of origin. Individuals who are granted international protection are referred to the UNHCR which is charged with the responsibility of finding long term solutions for resettlement of the vulnerable persons. The UNHCR cooperates directly with non-government organisation in the country that are able to provide necessary services to the individuals while long term solutions are being sought.

SLIDE 12- MAJOR CHALLENGES

As stated earlier, The Bahamas faces some challenges in managing irregular migration by sea, some of which are, insufficient human resources in the forms of immigration, investigation and enforcement officers; the lack of sufficient patrol vessels, the large maritime territory. Instances when authorities must process mixed migratory flows consisting of asylum seekers, economic migrants and trafficked persons put considerable strain on the country's resources.

SLIDE 13-BEST PRACTICES

The Bahamas has identified several successful methods of detection and interdiction of illegal migrants at sea. These include monitoring and responding to cyclical trends of migration, placing security and border control units in targeted, vulnerable locations within The Bahamas, as well as utilizing the available technology, such as "spotter" planes to cover large expanses of land and sea aerially.

SLIDE 14- CONCLUSION

The stemming of mixed migration flows will require, *inter alia*, enhanced cooperation between affected nations through effective information sharing, effective communication networks, and joint operations. It therefore, remains the Government's mission to find innovative methods to improve the efficiency of apprehension, screening, detention and repatriation exercises regarding irregular migrants.

I thank you for your attention.