

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER, DR. THE HON.
RALPH E. GONSALVES, JUNE 18, 2009**

ON

**TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS (TIP) WATCH LIST 2009 OF THE UNITED
STATES' WATCH LIST**

On June 16, 2009, the State Department of the US Government issued its ninth annual trafficking in persons (TIP) report. In this report, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, was named on "the Watch List".

The text of St. Vincent and the Grenadines' Country Narrative in the 2009 TIP Report reads in the substantive part as follows:-

"St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a potential source country for children trafficked internally for the purposes of sexual exploitation; it may also be a destination country for women trafficked for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation. Anecdotal reporting suggests the number of victims trafficked in, to, or through St. Vincent and the Grenadines is comparatively small. Information on the full extent of human trafficking in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, however, is lacking, as neither the government nor NGOs have conducted any related investigations, studies or surveys. Reports indicate that a traditional practice of sending children away from home to live with another family is sometimes misused for the purpose of coercing children into commercial sexual exploitation. In these

situations, care-givers force fostered children into sexual relationships in exchange for financial and in-kind compensation.”

The Tier 2 Watch List involves no sanctions placed against St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The Report lists a number of recommendations for possible action to be taken by the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines as follows:-

“Develop and implement a comprehensive anti-trafficking law; investigate allegations of the commercial sexual exploitation of children; utilise existing legal statutes to prosecute cases of women or children forced into commercial sexual exploitation; and provide protective services to children rescued from commercial sexual exploitation.”

The Government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines received with utter shock and dismay the announcement by the State Department that St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been placed on a “Watch List” regarding “human trafficking”.

This veritable bolt from the blue is arbitrary, high-handed, wrong, based on the most flimsy evidence and is at complete variance with the facts. St. Vincent and the Grenadines does not have trafficking in persons; it is prohibited by law; and our law enforcement and social services’ institutions are always on the active look-out for any sign of it. Right-thinking persons are asking “Where is the human trafficking?”

Indeed the very TIP Report on St. Vincent and the Grenadines by the US Government reveals that there is no evidential basis for the issuance of a placement of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on any such “Watch List”. The opening lines of the Report state:

“St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a potential source country for children trafficked internally for the purposes of sexual exploitation; it may also be a destination country for women trafficked for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation. Anecdotal reporting suggests the number of victims trafficked in, to, or through St. Vincent and the Grenadines is comparatively small.”

Honourable members please note the words: *“potential source country”, “may be a destination”, “anecdotal reporting suggests that the numbers.....is comparatively small.”*

The Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines has responded swiftly and formally to the US government on its TIP Report and the placement of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on this so-called “Watch List”. Yesterday I protested verbally to the US Embassy in Barbados in the person of its Chargé d’Affaires, Mr. Brent Hardt, who currently heads that Mission in the absence of the US Ambassador. In my two conversations with Mr. Hardt I outlined in detail the unfair, wrong, arbitrary, and discriminatory placement of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on this so-called “Watch List”. I did the same thing to the Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, Mr. Tom Shannon, whom I had requested to telephone me to discuss the matter. When I spoke to Mr. Shannon he was already in possession of a copy of a

letter which I had sent a few hours earlier to the Honourable Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. He undertook to convey the details of my conversation with him to Mrs. Clinton. Mr. Shannon was most sympathetic to the position of the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and was unable to defend the issuance of “the Watch List” in relation to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It appears to me that the agency in the US State Department charged with the responsibility under American Law to issue such “Watch Lists” is oblivious to the real factual situation regarding any alleged trafficking in persons in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and relies on hearsay, unreliable allegations, and some mischief-making by some busy-bodies. I shall find out about this sooner rather than later.

Yesterday, too, I was in touch with the Ambassador of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to Washington, Her Excellency Ms. La Celia Prince, and gave her certain information and instructions. She attended yesterday afternoon a general briefing on trafficking in persons at the US State Department for diplomats in Washington. I await her report which I expect to receive today.

In my conversation with the Chargé d’Affaires, Mr. Hardt, he made clear that the evidence on human trafficking in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is “slim, at best”. He informed me, too, that he had urged the relevant agency in the US government not to proceed with the naming of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on the “Watch List”. It is most doubtful that an agency in distant Washington would know more about St. Vincent and the Grenadines on any issue than the American diplomats and officials on the ground in the Eastern Caribbean. Indeed “the Text of St. Vincent and the Grenadines Country Narrative in the 2009 TIP Report”, published by the agency of

the US government, is inchoate, short on facts and probabilities, and long on possibilities, even fanciful ones.

Mr. Speaker, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has friendly relations with the USA. If any agency in the US government has any concern or allegation in relation to the issue of human trafficking in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, normal courtesies surely would demand that we be informed for appropriate comment. A proverbial sledgehammer wielded by a powerful neighbour upon a geographically small and relatively powerless ally would not easily commend itself to reasonable persons in these circumstances. Care ought to be taken not to stylise any unfounded allegations as facts.

Accordingly, I have protested formally, on behalf of my government, at this unfounded and irresponsible naming of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on “the Watch List” for alleged human trafficking.

My government has long committed itself to working with all responsible international bodies and countries, including the Americans, on all issues of international concern, including human trafficking.

I have requested formally, too, that the State Department make a thorough review of the matter of the placement of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on the said “Watch List”. I expect that my government would have an opportunity to comment on any relevant consideration in this review. I sincerely hope that the name of St. Vincent and the Grenadines would be removed soonest from this “Watch List”.

Mr. Speaker, for the record, let me state the following regarding the issue of trafficking in persons in relation to St. Vincent and the Grenadines:

1. **The Legal Framework**

There exists in this country a body of laws which criminalises and punishes the commercial sexual exploitation of children and women, and prostitution. These offences include intercourse with a girl under fifteen years old; indecency with a child; permitting a girl under 15 years to use premises for intercourse; causing or encouraging prostitution of a girl under 15 years; causing prostitution of a woman; detention in a brothel; man living on earnings of a prostitute; woman exercising control over a prostitute; keeping a brothel; procurement of a woman by threats or false pretences; administering drugs to facilitate intercourse and indecent practices between persons of the same sex. Each of them, and other sexual offences, carry hefty terms of imprisonment.

The Constitution of St. Vincent and the Grenadines prohibits slavery and forced labour.

2. **Law Enforcement**

The Police Force is well-equipped to enforce the laws of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Indeed, this administration established a Major Crimes

Unit in which there is a section which specialises in sexual offences, including prostitution, and the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children.

The Law Courts are well equipped to address these matters, too. There is a Family Court and a Serious Offences Court at the Magisterial Level, and a High Court in its Criminal jurisdiction.

There is an independent Office of the Director of Public Prosecution and also a team of competent Police Prosecutors.

The St. Vincent and the Grenadines Coast Guard with support from the RSS (Air Wing) and the RSS-coordination of other Coast Guard Services assist in stamping out human trafficking.

A competent, civilianised Immigration Service exists. There are tough immigration laws addressing issues touching and concerning the trafficking in persons.

3. **Support Institutions in Fight Against Trafficking in Persons**
(Advocacy, interventions, reportage, Social Services action)

(a) The Ministry of Social Development and its specialised agencies.

- (b) The thirty-nine district health clinics, the main hospital and five district hospitals.
- (c) Community health services.
- (d) Counselling available to all 61 primary schools and 27 secondary schools.
- (e) Parent Teachers' Associations in all schools.
- (f) The permanent National Commission on Crime Prevention headed by a woman, a former Superintendent of Police.
- (g) Non-Governmental Organisations such as Marion House, many of which are supported by the government.

4. **Advocacy, Public Awareness and Profile of Issue**

This is done on an on-going basis by:

- (a) The aforementioned institutions.
- (b) The political directorate including the Prime Minister.
- (c) The very active news media (print and electronic).

5. **International Coordination**

The Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines works assiduously with governments, international agencies, and NGOs worldwide on the issue of human trafficking.

FINAL COMMENT

On the basis of the TIP Report regarding St. Vincent and the Grenadines, if this country is to be placed on any such “Watch List” then every country in the world should be on it. But if every country is on a “Watch List”, in the end it means everything and nothing.

So, let a rational and fact-based analysis be done!

Finally Mr. Speaker, a bit of historical information. Sometime in 2003 or thereabouts, a group of women from the Dominican Republic were brought into this country by someone under a false cover but in reality to engage in commercial transactions in sex. Swiftly the Police and Immigration authorities acted. And on my instruction I caused them to be deported en masse. This government has no tolerance of such activities. Since then no individual or group has attempted such a venture in this country. We were swift and decisive.

I reiterate our firm stance in every material particular against human trafficking. We will continue to work with all nations in combating it on every front.