

Bahamas may be 'torn between' CARICOM, US

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The Bahamas may be forced to choose between the Caribbean Community and the United States with respect to its policy on the establishment of an International Criminal Court (ICC).

If CARICOM decides at an upcoming May 5 meeting to "break ranks" with the US and ratify the United Nations initiative, the Bahamas, if it follows suit, would also join these countries in being refused US financial assistance.

During a two-hour interview on the ZNS talk show "Steve McKinney Live", American Ambassador J. Richard Blankenship warned that, "If Caricom countries don't sign up to Article 98 agreements they are going to lose military funding."

Giving a deadline of June 30 for the Bahamas to decide whether or not it will support the United States' position on the ICC, the ambassador said that an 'unfavourable' response could result in a significant amount of US aid being withheld, some of which is earmarked for paving and lighting the runway in Inagua.

The US is advocating that its allies sign on to Article 98 agreements which would preclude The Bahamas and the United States, if they were to enter into an agreement, from extraditing to the world court anyone accused of committing an international crime.

Giving an example, Mr. Blankenship asked, "If the Royal Bahamas Defence Force were out on patrol one night, and if they were to inadvertently run over a Haitian sloop and unfortunately many drown and are killed, did you know that under the International Court those Defence Force men can be extradited to The Hague to stand trial?"

He asked, "Who do you want to administer justice to the RBDF, The Bahamas or some court."

Ironically, hours before the ambassador made these comments, Foreign Affairs Minister Fred Mitchell noted that CARICOM heads had postponed their decision on the matter at a recent meeting.

Minister Mitchell noted that at the 14th Inter-Sessional Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago from February 14-15, the decision on the US request to sign Article 98 agreements that would derogate from the statute establishing the International Criminal Court was postponed by CARICOM Heads.

The matter is to be reviewed by CARICOM Foreign Ministers when they meet on May 5th in light of a changed US proposal put to the body.

Said Ambassador Blankenship: "The United States is not going to participate and allow our soldiers to be sent by any country to be tried in Europe because we are what amounts to the peace-keeping country of the world. We have to step in as big brother. So obviously we are going to be subject to more of the attempts to extradite US soldiers than any other country.

"It is a very real concern," Ambassador Blankenship said, adding that "Congress has put teeth in this agreement."

According to show host Steve Mckinney, 120 countries voted to ratify the treaty, and only seven countries, including China, Israel, Iraq, and the United States, voted against it.

Over 50 years ago, the United Nations proposed an International Criminal Court to prosecute such crimes against humanity as genocide, "in the guise of ethnic cleansing." In more recent times, steps have been taken to include other "crimes of similar gravity," including drug trafficking.

An International Criminal Court is needed to achieve justice for all, according to the UN website.

An ICC is "the missing link in the international legal system," the UN states, as the International Court of Justice deliberates only on cases between States, and not individuals.

"Without an international court for dealing with individual responsibility as an enforcement mechanism," the report concludes, "acts of genocide and egregious violations of human rights often go unpunished."