



GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
MINISTRY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

CARIBBEAN AIRLINES INAUGURAL FLIGHT, HAVANA, CUBA

REMARKS

SENATOR THE HONOURABLE PAULA GOPEE SCOON
MINISTER OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

13TH JANUARY, 2018

Today's arrival marks the return of our national carrier Caribbean Airlines' direct flight service from Trinidad and Tobago to Cuba. We have landed here with the confidence that we have the product quality and the tested relationships to ensure success on this intra-regional route.

Trinidad and Tobago has enjoyed a long and sustained relationship with Cuba. The country's first Prime Minister Dr Eric Williams led regional initiatives during the early 1970's establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba. This approach has been sustained over the decades with the country's current Prime Minister Dr Keith Rowley continuing to strengthen this long standing association through ongoing efforts to deepen existing relationships.

Last December's CARICOM – Cuba Summit focused on the development of further co-operation, trade and economic relations between CARICOM and Cuba. Cuba's historic development co-operation with CARICOM has been characterised by its solidarity, and oriented towards high social impact goals.

Member States of CARICOM and Cuba have enjoyed cordial and fruitful interaction since Bilateral Diplomatic relations were first established between Cuba and Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago (the founding Members of CARICOM) in 1972. The then leaders of these states were keen to acknowledge Cuba as an integral part of the Caribbean family, a family which, though separated by culture and language, is nevertheless joined together by a common will to be united.

On December 08, 2017, both the forty-fifth (45th) anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Trinidad and Tobago and Cuba, and CARICOM-Cuba Day were commemorated. It is only natural to reflect on the proud legacy and accomplishments of Trinidad and Tobago's relations with Cuba at the bilateral level as well as within the framework of CARICOM. The mutually rewarding bilateral relationship has been nurtured over the years in the joint pursuit of common goals, and is characterised by mutual respect and sustained cooperation in diverse areas namely, health, sport, education, disaster risk reduction, culture, agriculture and now, air transportation. At present, we are working on another dimension to our relationship by pursuing collaboration in the area of tourism.

Trinidad and Tobago also enjoys a vibrant commercial alliance with Cuba and participation in the annual Feria Internacional de La Habana (FIHAV) – the Havana International Trade Fair, has provided excellent opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago's businesses to enter the Cuban market. Fittingly, FIHAV has served as the backdrop for the finalization of major business transactions between Trinidad and Tobago companies and Cuban entities.

CARICOM-Cuba relations are characterised by sustained levels of technical co-operation at both the national and regional levels, and by support for each other in areas of mutual interest in various regional, hemispheric and international fora. Over time, the CARICOM-Cuba partnership has been bolstered through encounters at the political and diplomatic level in the CARICOM – Cuba Summits and Meetings of Foreign Ministers. During the Sixth CARICOM-Cuba Summit, held on December 08, 2017 in Antigua and Barbuda, deliberations focused on the further strengthening of economic and trade ties as well as co-operation in areas including, transportation and tourism, agriculture and natural disasters.

The Summit noted the significantly increased interest among Caribbean entrepreneurs to develop business and commercial relations. The potential for complementarity in the area of tourism was recognised by the signing at the Summit of a Memorandum of Understanding on multi-destination tourism between CARICOM countries and Cuba. In this regard, the Summit identified air and sea transportation as an area requiring priority attention.

Over the years, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has reaffirmed its commitment to the strengthening of existing ties with Cuba and to the building of new bridges as both countries forge ahead. There have been many milestones along the journey which began with that bold step in 1972 and the Trinidad and Tobago – Cuba relationship has survived and blossomed into a partnership at the bilateral and regional levels.

Additionally, in the area of trade and economic relations, Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to the CARICOM – Cuba Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement. Trinidad and Tobago's total exports to Cuba was valued at four hundred and fifty five (455) million in 2016. Total imports in 2016 were valued at thirty seven (37) million. The Second Protocol to the Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement was signed in 2017. In the context of the Second Protocol, Cuba granted additional preferential access to CARICOM for 326 duty free items. CARICOM granted additional preferential access to Cuba for

seventy-four (74) items. This is expected to result in increased trade between CARICOM and Cuba and more specifically Trinidad and Tobago and Cuba.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is recognised by both Cuba and CARICOM that there is great potential and opportunity for trade and that there is significantly increased interest among Caribbean entrepreneurs to develop and strengthen business and commercial relations with Cuba.

These ambitions can now become more of a reality with the start of this direct and convenient, twice weekly service from Trinidad and Tobago to Havana. The Caribbean Airlines schedule for this flight has been developed to facilitate seamless connections to and from other Caribbean destinations including Barbados, Grenada and Guyana, with one of our most valued regional neighbours, the Republic of Cuba!

For Trinidad and Tobago and Caribbean Airlines, Cuba has always been a priority. Whether the airline was on the route or not, this destination has been on our radar for as long as Caribbean Airlines has been around. While we intend to ensure that the route is commercially valuable, our presence here goes far beyond economics. We are here, first of all, because we are family, the Caribbean family.

History may have set us on different paths, but it is our pledge that Caribbean Airlines will do everything in its power to unite us.

This route is a path into a future to which we are deeply committed- a future of an integrated Caribbean. Caribbean Airlines offers itself as the bridge across which our people will journey towards each other, in delight and discovery of opportunity.

We are here today with senior officials of the Governments of the Republic of Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago, esteemed members of the Diplomatic Corps, distinguished members of Industry, the media of Trinidad and Tobago and Cuba, key members of the travel agency sector and other valued guests and media. Our hope is that you will all recognise the critical importance of this air-link and the opportunities that await our people on both sides of this route and beyond.

Caribbean Airlines accepts its mandate to connect the Caribbean to itself and the world. In so doing, the airline opens the way for others to find opportunity for trade, education, health services, leisure, cultural and scientific exchanges and, in general, the building of regional community. This is a responsibility that Caribbean Airlines does not take lightly.

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Honourable Prime Minister, the Board, management and staff of Caribbean Airlines, we pledge to work in solidarity with you to ensure the commercial success of this route and its development as a core path into the future of a more integrated Caribbean.

Ladies and gentlemen. I thank you.

