Welcome Remarks

Inaugural Lecture Centre for Biosecurity Studies

February 24, 2020

Protocol ... Good evening and Welcome!

I wish to thank all of you for joining us this evening to hear the inaugural public lecture of the recently established Centre for Biosecurity Studies. The Campus is extremely pleased and very fortunate that Mr O’Neil Hamilton, Caricom’s Regional Implementation Coordinator for the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 is delivering the initial biosecurity lecture on, Advancing Biosecurity Governance in the Caribbean and the Role of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.

The University of the West Indies, 2017-2022 Triple A Strategic Plan, states our commitment to revitalising and protecting Caribbean well-being. Now in our 72nd year, the record proves that through recurring cycles of natural disasters, political change, economic growth and public health concerns, The University of the West Indies remains at the forefront of the search for solutions to Caribbean challenges. The Centre for Biosecurity Studies is one such mechanism the
University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus is putting at the disposal of the region to assist with the myriad, intersecting challenges that can morph into biosecurity threats.

In its earliest expression, biosecurity related primarily to keeping unwanted pests and diseases from crossing borders. Today it still involves maintaining strict border scrutiny to protect our biodiversity against pathogens and toxins, but biosecurity involves so much more. For instance, biosecurity now requires a clearly established legal framework to support the fight against human and narco-trafficking, illegal dumping of toxic and other waste in our territorial waters, the burgeoning illicit trade in firearms, and the ever present, money laundering. How many of us are aware for example that, “in 2016 Carnival’s Princess Cruise line agreed to pay a US$40 million penalty for illegally dumping oil contaminated waste into the sea and trying to cover it up”? And that “Carnival acknowledged violating probation terms from that case and was ordered to pay an additional US$20 Million penalty”?¹ This waste was dumped in the ocean off the coast of England in 2016². Imagine for a moment, if it had been dumped in the Caribbean

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Sea with our heavy dependence on tourism and fisheries. In my opinion should this occur, this would constitute an economic and environmental crime, do we have the regional governance system to police and deal with such an occurrence?

Yet my partial listing does not exhaust the intersecting threats that constitute biosecurity risks. Critical to maintaining a robust biosecurity system are issues of a forceful, vigorous governance structure particularly as these apply to biological and toxic weapons. We may be justifiably concerned about the threats posed by the novel corona virus, and whether or not it would turn up in the Caribbean. We need however to be equally concerned as to whether our countries have a governance structure to deal with a deliberate attack, that is the use of a virus as a weapon rather than its accidental manifestation. And by that I mean its incidence that is not informed by deliberate, malicious action.

I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, to wish the Government and people, especially our many colleagues at HANBAN, the Global Institute for Software Technology, and the China University of Political Science and Law, good health and every success in the containment of the Novel Corona virus. We thank you for your duty of care expressed to all Caribbean students and citizens who are there. We know China is
a strong country with a resilient people, and the UWI Cave Hill Campus fully expects that this grave health crisis will be brought under control.

The myriad economic, social and health challenges produced by the devastating hurricanes of 2017 and 2018, (Irma and Dorian) served as forerunners for other menacing vulnerabilities for Caribbean countries. These vulnerabilities encompass geographical degradation, such as coastal erosion, heightened health challenges such as bacterial threats and temperature related health concerns, exacerbated socio-economic conditions of poverty due to massive dislocations and loss of resources and livelihoods. All these adversities cumulatively can create both geo-political and bio-security concerns.

We have also seen recent reports in the news of the levels of a hazardous chemical, chlordecone, occurring in the bloodstream of the vast majority of the populations of Martinique and Guadeloupe. While this may have seemed as a recent discovery to some, this has been an issue that was known since the 1960s. This toxic pesticide, banned in the US in the mid-70s, was used on banana plantations in those French territories from 1972 until its commercial use in those countries was stopped in the nineties. An inquiry on the residual effects is being undertaken.
The work programme of the Centre for Biosecurity studies will be multidisciplinary and geared to assist governments in creating a robust Biosecurity System would help to protect livelihoods, natural resources and biodiversity from harmful effects of adverse weather, pests, diseases, toxins, technology, and geo-political security concerns that cumulatively can threaten to corrode the social and economic wellbeing of Caribbean societies. The prediction, anticipation and prevention of such threats represent the core research, training and policy agenda intended to strengthen the academic, legal, social, economic and political capacity of the region. The University wishes to work collaboratively with governments and relevant agencies to, predict, anticipate, prevent, and produce policy to manage such events wherever possible. The main activities of the Centre will be training and provision of advice to governments and agencies via consultant research and policy briefs.

The Centre will offer short, fee-paying certificate courses in several areas of Biosecurity. These would include courses such as, Global Biosecurity Treaties and Local\Regional Implications; Cyber and Data Sovereignty and Security; Emerging Infectious Diseases and Bio Intelligence; Law Enforcement; the Anthropology of Biosecurity; Promoting Public Learning, the Economics and sociology of public disasters, Bio-safety and Public disasters.
These courses will target professional graduates, aid workers, government officials and international development agency personnel who are involved in Bio Security issues, as well as science and legal professionals who wish to acquire advanced understanding of the issues and enhance their professional education as well as reinforce their professional responsibilities. Additionally, the courses will be geared to current students of the UWI, Barbados Community College (BCC) and other tertiary institutions, to stimulate interest for careers in related fields.

Tonight we are sharing the expertise of one of our Associate Experts of the Centre for Biosecurity Studies. Welcome to what I know will be a very stimulating lecture.

Eudine Barriteau

February 23, 2020