



*The
Bahamas*

**38th SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE
ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD**

UNITED NATIONS OFFICE AT GENEVA

**CONSIDERATION OF THE
INITIAL REPORT OF
THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS**

**STATEMENT BY HON. MELANIE GRIFFIN, M.P.
MINISTER OF SOCIAL SERVICES
AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS**

19 JANUARY, 2005

Please check against delivery

Chairperson, Distinguished members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child,

I have the honour to introduce the initial report of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, submitted in accordance with paragraph 1 of Article 44 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

At the outset, let me affirm that my Government is both strong in its commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and resolute in its determination to improve the welfare of children as provided for in the Convention.

The Government of The Bahamas is pleased at this opportunity to engage in dialogue with the Committee on the implementation of the Convention in The Bahamas, and expresses its regret at the prolonged delay in the submission of its initial report. I wish to offer the Government's assurance that we will make every effort to provide the timely submission of future reports under the Convention. I pledge the Government's full and constructive cooperation with the Committee.

I also wish to express the Government's appreciation to the Committee for agreeing to postpone the consideration of The Bahamas' report from September 2004 to this 38th session due to the hurricanes which impacted The Bahamas in September. We were fortunate that only two lives were lost, and I am pleased to report that the recovery and reconstruction programme is progressing well.

Before I proceed, please allow me to introduce the other members of The Bahamas' delegation who would seek to respond to the Committee's comments and questions related to the Report before it. I am accompanied by Ms. Mellany Zonicle, Director of Social Services, Department of Social Services, Ministry of Social Services and Community Development; Mrs. Andrea Archer, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health and Environment; Mrs. Carnetta Ferguson, Assistant Director of Education, Ministry of Education, Ms. Kayla Green, Counsel, Office of the Attorney General and Ms. Nicole Archer, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas to the United Nations, New York.

The report before the Committee is the product of a process of inter-agency collaboration within The Bahamas, involving primarily four Government Ministries with specific mandates to implement the provisions of the Convention. The Ministry of Social Services and Community Development took the lead in coordinating the preparation of the Report, and has attempted to follow the Committee's reporting guidelines as closely as possible.

Chairperson,

In presenting this statement, I wish to offer the Committee some information regarding the context within which implementation of the Convention should be understood, as well as some of the actions undertaken by The Bahamas to meet its obligations in this regard.

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas is a small, middle-income, developing archipelagic state. The most recent census of population, in July 2000, placed the total population of The Bahamas at 303,611. The Bahamas can be considered a 'young' nation as twenty-nine percent (29%) of its population is under fifteen years of age. The advantages, and

indeed imperatives of implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child are therefore obvious. The Bahamas is also a young sovereign nation, having gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1973.

The Bahamas' economy is based on the two main economic activities of tourism and financial services, and the country's relative success in these two areas has resulted in The Bahamas attaining a per capita income of \$16,500 in 2004. This relative prosperity must be seen, however, within a context of uneven development and resource distribution, as the population is spread over approximately twenty (20) main islands and cays. Eighty percent (80%) of the population is concentrated in two main urban areas, while the remaining twenty percent (20%) is scattered over numerous settlements within the various islands. The population distribution has resulted in a considerable strain on the resources of the country in terms of the duplication of social and economic infrastructure in each of the population centres. The Government remains committed, however, to ensuring the provision of essential social services to the entire population.

Ethnically speaking, The Bahamas has a relatively homogenous population, as approximately eighty-five (85%) percent is of Afro-Caribbean origin, while the remaining fifteen percent (15%) consists largely of persons of Caucasian, Hispanic and Asian origin. The population has a high rate of literacy, standing at approximately eighty-five percent (85%), and a high level of participation in the political processes in The Bahamas. The Bahamas is characterized by a Westminster-style government, with a bicameral Parliament.

The most pressing issue with respect to the make-up of the population of The Bahamas stems from the problem of illegal immigration, largely from The Bahamas' sister Caribbean country Haiti. However, the Government of The Bahamas makes every effort to ensure that all persons in The Bahamas, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality and immigration status are accorded their human rights and fundamental freedoms and are ensured access to basic social services and due process of law.

Chairperson,

The legal framework of The Bahamas is founded on the Constitution, which is the supreme law of the land. In addition, English common law forms the basis of the judicial system, complemented by a large volume of Bahamian statute law. It is the rights and guarantees entrenched in the Constitution for all persons, as well as the relevant common and statute law that are the most relevant in implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Since coming to office in May 2002, my Government has placed priority on investing in children through its policies and budgetary allocations. The investment in the development of children attempts to ensure that no child goes hungry, none is homeless, none is denied medical services due to lack of funds, no child remains illiterate, none abused or abandoned; and every child has the right to be respected and protected by his/her family, the community and the State.

A major advance since May 2002 has been the creation of the Ministry of Social Services and Community Development, where I have the privilege of serving as Minister. My portfolio includes Social Services, Care Facilities, Child Protection, Disabled Persons and Rehabilitative Services. Previously these portfolio matters were tacked onto another

Ministry such as Health, Labour and Housing. The creation of the Ministry of Social Services and Community Development allows for these matters to be given greater focus and attention.

Due to the cross-cutting nature of these areas of responsibility, there has been collaboration since 2003 among the Ministries of Social Services, Health and Education at the Ministerial level on issues relating to children, ranging from early childhood education through after-school activities to parenting education.

I am pleased to report that, since the submission of the report before you, the Residential Care Facilities Act was assented to in December 2004. The Act calls for an Authority that will regulate all residential facilities including children's homes, to ensure that children are safe and exposed to nurturing environments.

I am also pleased to report that discussions are underway with the Office of the Attorney General towards the preparation of a new Act for the well-being and protection of children. The amendments are comprehensive and have taken into account many of the Articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The major provisions deal with Children in Need of Care and Protection, Children in Care and Children Detained or Brought before a Court. I look forward to sharing the results of these discussions with the Committee at future sessions.

Another major advancement is the launch of a pilot National Youth Programme on 9 January 2005. The pilot programme targets fifty (50) at-risk young men, 15 to 18 years old. The Programme will be extended to young women after its initial pilot phase.

Chairperson, Distinguished members of the Committee,

The Government of The Bahamas is committed to the establishment of partnerships with non-governmental organizations and the participation of NGOs in the development of policies and programmes. The Zonta Club of Nassau, a service organization comprised of professional women is a part of the inter-agency collaboration meetings I spoke of earlier. Additionally, sub-committees have liaised with other NGOs and elements of civil society, including the Church and trade unions, to facilitate greater input in proposed programmes. Also, the Ministry of Youth has partnered with a private programme, the Youth Empowerment and Skills Training [YEAST] Programme, which falls under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, for the implementation of the pilot National Youth Programme.

Chairperson,

I wish to conclude by reaffirming The Bahamas' unwavering commitment to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to pledge The Bahamas' continuing cooperation with this Committee, and the international community as a whole, in meeting this goal.

My delegation stands ready to engage in a constructive dialogue with the Committee and to respond to the Committee's comments and questions.

Thank you.