GOVERNMENT OF SAINT LUCIA

Ministry of External Affairs, International Trade, Civil Aviation and Diaspora Affairs

STATEMENT ON INCIDENT OF MINISTER'S SUBSISTENCE CHEQUE POSTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The Ministry of External Affairs, International Trade, Civil Aviation and Diaspora Affairs makes reference to an incident which happened on Friday, 9th June 2023, in which images of a Government cheque issued to Minister Alva Baptiste appeared on social media under seemingly questionable circumstances.

The cheque was issued to meet costs associated with the Honourable Minister's attendance at the 53rd Regular Session of the OAS General Assembly in Washington DC from the June 21 – 23, 2023, namely accommodation for 7 nights in DC, and meals along with subsistence for the 8 days (Including travel days), that the Minister will be away.

Although Minister Baptiste has done his part in debunking the disparaging assertions that accompanied the online postings, I am duty bound as administrative head of the Ministry to address the matter as it relates to 1) Concerns about the confidentiality and fidelity of public officials in the handling of government information with which they are entrusted; and 2) Anxieties about the amount of the cheque.

On the issue of a potential confidentiality breach, I can report that the Ministry conducted an in-depth investigation into the incident and we are satisfied that the leaking of the document to social media resulted from a genuine error and was not driven by mischievous or malicious motives. If anything, the Ministry's investigation revealed the continued need to exercise care in the transmission of official documents and information. This is particularly true in the age of information and communication technology, an age which has brought with it a heightened risk that confidential messages or information may inadvertently end up in the wrong destination or in the public domain.

Notwithstanding, the Ministry condemns efforts by some to capitalize on the latest glitch to commit political mischief and to mislead. For instance, despite perverted references to the cheque as an illustration of lavish government spending on travel, the sums for meals and subsistence allowance are computed using standard rates that have been in existence for over 25 years and have transcended several Administrations. Moreover, these rates are differentiated by region; by whether the traveler is a Minister or Public Sector Official; and by whether the event being attended is a conference or a non-conference activity. Accommodation rates, however, are dependent on quoted hotel rates that are of course set by the vagaries of the market in the respective location.

To aid the understanding of those who might otherwise be misled, the cheque which was posted on social media was in the amount of ***Eastern Caribbean Thirteen Thousand, Three Hundred and Sixty Dollars and Seventy-One Cents [EC$13,360.71]***. From that amount **EC$7,493.19 (or USD$2,758)** is to cover accommodation in Washington DC for 7 nights and the remaining **EC$5,868.40 (or USD$2,160)** is for meals and subsistence for 8 days. These are standard allocations and clearly are not unreasonable when one considers the location of the meeting, namely Washington DC. The total of the cheque in U.S. currency is **USD$4,917**. What is lavish about that?

PERMANENT SECRETARY
Ministry of External Affairs, International Trade, Civil Aviation and Diaspora Affairs
15th June 2023