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Senators Blast VIPD Commissioner Ray Martinez Following Lack of Law Enforcement Presence at Critical St. John Public Safety Hearing

Senator Johnson Advocates for Commissioner Martinez's Removal Amid Ongoing Issues; Labels Police Officers 'Cowards', and Demands Accountability

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VIPD Commissioner Ray Martinez at a past hearing, not Thursday's. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers vote to issue subpoenas after a discussion on current public safety and security concerns on the island of St. John was apparently snubbed by Police Commissioner Ray Martinez and the entire Virgin Islands Police Department.

Mr. Martinez was invited to participate in the discussion and also testify on Bill 35-0086, which relates to requiring background checks for government IT personnel and employees which handle confidential information.

According to chair of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety Senator Kenneth Gittens, Mr. Martinez was informed about Thursday's hearing over a month ago, and written to formally around October 30th. On Monday this week, Mr. Gittens said he received correspondence that Mr. Martinez would not be present. "Since then [I] contacted the Office of the Governor, the Special Assistant to the governor, who oversees a cluster of public safety and spoke to the Chief of Staff. They stated that they were going to try to reach out and see if they could have representation here. To my surprise, there is no representation here. [...] There is no excuse for it," Mr. Gittens griped.

It wasn't just Mr. Gittens upset at the absence of any law enforcement personnel. Nearly every testifier and senator expressed their extreme disappointment when given a chance to speak. "May I say informally, that I too am disappointed that we don't have the police commissioner and others here. Because there are many things we would like to ask them that don't get answered," said Sharon Coldren, volunteer president of the Coral Bay Community Council.

Senator Franklin Johnson, however, was perhaps the most incensed over the VIPD's failure to appear, calling police officers "cowards." He argued that Mr. Martinez is frequently absent for critical discussions such as these. "I'm really fed up of...coming to these hearings, and Ray Martinez [is] not showing up," Mr. Johnson said. "This is about the fourth time Commissioner Ray Martinez has been invited to Homeland Security and Justice and has not shown up."

While Mr. Gittens expressed his intention to hold similar meetings to discuss crime and security on each island, Mr. Johnson protested. "I am not going on with the meetings unless Ray Martinez and his team is subpoenaed. I'm not gonna waste my time," the lawmaker declared. "He cannot show up to listen to the residents of this territory when crime is rampant all over this place. It's a shame," Mr. Johnson continued, before continuing to rhetorically rake the police commissioner over the coals.

Mr. Johnson contrasted how accessible Mr. Martinez was before his confirmation to the post with his availability after securing the job. "He called my office and came to my office three times for my support," said the senator. "Today, I can't get the commissioner on my phone," he lamented, calling the vote on Mr. Martinez' confirmation "the worst vote ever made...in the Senate." He argued that Mr. Martinez had proven himself incapable of meeting the responsibilities of the position. "When the leader of the police department doesn't even send one representative here, it tells me we need a new commissioner."

Mr. Johnson continued by blaming himself for the current status quo. "I'm the fault [for] why he's there. Because I voted for him and he has failed us." He was driven by his deep dissatisfaction with the commissioner's lack of responsiveness to then submit a motion that Mr. Martinez, the commissioner of Public Safety, and "all responsible persons in that agency" be subpoenaed each time there is a need for them to appear at meetings of the homeland security and public safety Senate committee. With at least four lawmakers seconding the motion, it passed easily. Legal counsel will now prepare the necessary documentation.

"I don't feel good about having to do that subpoena," said Mr. Gittens, "but it was necessary and the committee made a decision to do it." Previously, lawmakers have issued subpoenas to various agency heads, including [Roger Merritt](#) of the VI Waste Management Authority, [Winnie](#)

[Testamark](#) of the Bureau of Corrections, and former Commissioner of Education [Raquel Berry-Benjamin](#), to compel their appearance before legislative committees.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, despite seconding the subpoena motion and subsequently voting for it, said that Mr. Martinez was not the one who should ultimately be blamed for his chronic failure to appear before the legislative body. “I have to go straight for the boss,” she said, arguing that as his direct superior, Governor Bryan should be more aware and more responsive to his underling’s lapses. “You as the executive branch executor — who asked for this man, to set out your agenda — keep hearing that we’re having problems, you’re not even stepping in and saying, ‘Look, why are you not at the legislature? Why are your people not here? Why am I hearing so many complaints?’” she pointed out.

Noting that the VIPD offices on St. John were right next to the legislative building on the island, Ms. Francis Heyliger called the absence of all law enforcement personnel “disgusting.”

“I am not mincing words,” she declared. “It’s disrespectful and it’s dangerous.” She called on residents of the territory to hold their public officials to account. “We have to expect better of our leaders and the governor of the Virgin Islands, who is Mr. Martinez’s boss, should expect better of the people he asked to put out his agenda.”