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Tensions Flare in Senate Hearing as Police Commissioner Refuses to Respond to Senator Johnson

Stalemate in Senate as Commissioner Martinez's standoff with Senator Johnson over "coward" remark takes center stage

Senate / **Published On February 02, 2024 05:44 AM /**

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**From left to right, Police Commissioner Ray Martinez and Senator Franklin Johnson.
By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

During Wednesday's meeting of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Police Commissioner Ray Martinez made it clear that he and the other VIPD representatives were not in attendance voluntarily. "The Virgin Islands Police Department was subpoenaed to be here, and as such, we are available to answer any questions this committee may have," Mr. Martinez

responded when prompted to provide opening testimony by committee chair Senator Kenneth Gittens.

The lawmaker was not pleased at the lack of prepared testimony. “I must note that the subpoena was clear on the information that the committee requests,” Mr. Gittens responded. “We should have had testimony regarding information relating to police operations, policy, procedures and initiatives relative to the community safety and security, and to provide an overview of public safety and security on the island of St. John.”

After having expressed his disappointment, Mr. Gittens moved to the next testifier and the hearing proceeded apace, until it was Senator Franklin Johnson’s turn for questioning. Mr. Johnson first sought information from representatives of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency and St. Thomas Rescue before turning to Mr. Martinez with a question about the VIPD’s caseload on St. John.

“I will answer every other senator in here with the exception of him,” the commissioner told Senator Gittens, who immediately pushed back. “The senator asked a question of the Virgin Islands Police Department. It is not personal. We expect a response from the Virgin Islands Police Department regarding such,” Mr. Gittens admonished.

“On behalf of the Virgin Islands Police Department...I’m not answering this question,” the commissioner retorted. The committee chair reminded Mr. Martinez that he was present as a result of a subpoena, which prompted the commissioner to ask “at what point in time is this committee going to address my concerns, and those derogatory statements that the senator made?”

Mr. Gittens noted that there has been no complaint filed in connection with [comments](#) Senator Johnson made during November’s public safety hearing. “I will tuck my ego today...but I want the record to reflect that as well — that no one on this committee has addressed those derogatory statements and they should not require a complaint,” Mr. Martinez conceded.

Even so, Mr. Gittens reminded him that formal processes for addressing perceived grievances was standard practice, even within the police force. “If someone feels that one of your commanders or one of your fellow officers committed some infraction, unless there is a complaint to you, how would you address it?” Mr Gittens asked.

Since the last public safety meeting in St. John, during which the absent police commissioner received stinging critique from lawmakers including Mr. Johnson’s suggestion that Mr. Martinez be replaced, the commissioner had vowed [not to respond](#) to any of the senator’s queries until he received an apology.

In late December, Johnson spoke to Consortium journalists about the commissioner’s demand. Attempting to clarify his previous comments, the lawmaker explained that contrary to the assertions made by Martinez, he was not referring to the rank and file of the VIPD when he uttered the word “coward”, but rather the commissioner himself for what Johnson described as ducking accountability.

With the subpoena now satisfied, the question of whether the impasse has been broken will perhaps have to wait until the next meeting of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety.