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Bahamas Government Denies Statement on Missing People Made by Former Health Minister

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Hurricane Dorian's damage to parts of the Bahamas in August, 2019.

NASSAU, Bahamas, CMC – The Bahamas government said it was “shocked and profoundly disappointed” by the recent comments by former health minister, Dr. Duane Sands, about people still missing following the passage of Hurricane Dorian last September.

In a statement, the Ministry of National Security said that Sands recent statements in the Parliament were “particularly surprising given that as the Minister of Health he played a leading role in the Government’s Hurricane Dorian’s response and restoration.

“He was afforded every opportunity to voice his concerns about the process and offer solutions to improve it,” the statement noted.

Last Thursday, Sands told legislators that the government had mishandled the identification of those persons still missing and others killed during the Category 5 storm that passed through the archipelago on September 1.

Sands acknowledged that no explanation has been given on how hundreds of names were excluded from an early list of people reported missing noting responsibility was spread over multiple ministries and government agencies.

In May, Sands offered his resignation due to the controversy surrounding permanent residents allowed entry to the country from a plane carrying COVID-19 test swabs.

But in the statement, the Ministry of National Security recalled that in an interview with the Miami Herald on September, 8, 2019, Sands called information suggesting a cover-up “false” and “unfortunate.”

“In light of the aforesaid, the Ministry finds the former Minister’s most recent comments disingenuous. His comments malign the good name and reputation of the hard working men and women in uniform, who continue to this day to make sacrifices to help those families affected by Dorian.

“His recent comments are misleading, and whether intentionally or unintentionally, impinge the good standing efforts of our nation in the eyes of the international community and to reopen up old wounds of a people whose lives have been shattered as a result of this tragedy.”

The government said that given the magnitude of the disaster, it had mobilized the public and private sectors, while seeking the assistance of the international community to manage the crisis.

It said that the Royal Bahamas Police Force, by law, is the agency of government responsible for the investigations of all persons reported missing in the country.

“The police, in partnership with other government agencies, NGOs and international experts undertook the very arduous task of compiling a list of missing individuals.

“From the onset, it was a known fact that some people in search of missing relatives were making reports to agencies/organizations other than the police including the Department of Social Services, the Red Cross and NEMA. The Police immediately went to work to compile a centralized list which totaled 1,092 people from both Grand Bahama and Abaco. Of the total, 34 were from Grand Bahama and 1,058 were from Abaco.”

The statement said that after the police took receipt of the initial list and began their reconciliation work, they discovered that the list consisted not only of missing persons but also persons in need of housing assistance, persons reporting other crimes, persons who were displaced, and duplication of names.

“The number of persons falling within these categories totalled 813. The police missing persons list currently stands at 279. As the reconciliation process continues these numbers are expected to fluctuate,” the Ministry of National Security said.

It said it should be noted that fluctuations after such a disaster is common as was the case in Hurricane Katrina.

“The Police Force and its partner agencies will continue with its efforts which are well documented and consistent with international standards and best practices,” the ministry said, adding that the police continue to use various forms in a bid to locate missing persons including the use of flyers in English and Creole to encourage individuals to report sightings.

“At no time was any attempt made by the Police or anyone else to delete any names off the list without first performing due diligence. If the former Minister or anyone else has information to prove otherwise the Ministry request that it be made public for all to see,” the Ministry of National Security added.

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