

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Shootings Continue As Leaders Debate Strategy And Tactics To Stem Violent Crime In Territory

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Armed thugs continue about their bloody business as Virgin Islands law enforcement and political leaders debate strategy and tactics to stem the wave of violent crime plaguing the territory.

In the latest weekend of violence, scores of children and families were [caught in the crossfire of a shootout Sunday at the "Floatopia" event on St. Croix](#). Six people were taken to the hospital with gunshot wounds – one victim was flown to the mainland for treatment -- police spokesman Glen Dratte said.

At a gathering of Gov. Albert Bryan's top public safety officials last week, Police Commissioner Nominee Trevor Velinor called the state of affairs in the territory "a state of emergency" with respect to violence fueled by illegal guns. Officials met with reporters to discuss wide-ranging plans to combat gun violence, cleanup corruption and restore public trust in government.

The "state of emergency" comment may reflect the complexity of dealing with the influx of illegal guns, and the shootings that follow. The remark also raises questions about whether there is a disconnect in how the administration combats gun violence.

Gov. Bryan in January rebuffed lawmakers calls for him to declare an official state of emergency and bring together local and federal law enforcement agencies to develop a way forward. The governor said that such declarations would do little to reduce crime, but instead would harm efforts to boost tourism in the territory.

"Declaring states of emergency does not help in any way; they're just words of where we feel on crime, and does further to damage our product, especially on St. Croix because this is where the recent spate of crime has been concentrated," Mr. Bryan said at the time.

State of emergency declarations give government certain specific powers to act and override rules. In case of law enforcement, the V.I.P.D. could conduct warrantless searches in residences suspected of harboring illegal firearms, for example.

The last time a state of emergency was declared in the U.S. Virgin Islands in response to violent crime [was in September 2015](#), when criminal factions on St. Croix broke into open warfare on the streets.

According to the governor's Communications Director, Richard Motta, the administration is deeply committed to solving the crime problem. But the solution, at the moment, does not entail declaration of an official state of emergency.

"Crime is a matter of public exigency," Mr. Motta said. "The need to stem the tide of illegal guns is among the high-priority items" on the governor's agenda.

Gov. Bryan: There is No Distance Between Them

Mr. Motta said the commissioner nominee referred to a crime emergency in the broad context of crime levels in recent years compared to 20 years ago. Mr. Velinor "... used the term in contextualizing the current state of affairs. ... There is no distance between them (Mr. Velinor and Gov. Bryan) on the matter."

Mr. Velinor told reporters last week, "When I left the territory in 2000, there were 24 homicides in the territory. It's now 20 years later and that's the number we have for just the past six months. We cannot be tolerant of this kind of violent crime."

Addressing violence fueled by illegal guns takes more than police powers alone, Mr. Velinor said. "The police department is one part of the solution. But we are not the only part of the solution. We have educators. We have mental health workers. We have parents. We have teachers. Everyone plays a part in this, but the police department plays an important part in the process."

