

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VIPD Brass Addresses Public Weeks After String of Deadly Shootings on St. Thomas; Police Arrest Man Linked to Nightclub Shooting

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ST. THOMAS — Under pressure from V.I. Senate lawmakers, top law enforcement officials Tuesday sought to ease some of the public tensions and uncertainty over the deadly crime wave that dimmed the Christmas spirit for some St. Thomians last month.

V.I. Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor and Lt. Deborah Hodge, commander of the department's Criminal Investigative Unit, offered a few fresh details about the crime wave during an afternoon press briefing on St. Thomas. New information released Tuesday included an arrest linked to the deadly shooting at the Exclusive Bar and Lounge in

Contant on December 22nd.

Twenty-six-year-old Kenedy Francisco Estevez Pinales of Enighed, St. John, was arrested on Saturday on charges of possession of stolen property, destruction of evidence and grand larceny. Mr. Pinales was spotted on surveillance video removing items from the scene of the shooting [at the Exclusive Bar and Lounge Night Club in Contant](#).

Mr. Velinor also provided for the first time partial details about the nightclub violence that left two men dead and others wounded. According to the commissioner, 45-year-old Ivan de Aza entered the hotel's Exclusive Bar and Nightclub and opened fire, killing Luis Castillo Agramonte, 27, and wounding two other men.

Authorities said a bystander then pulled out a gun and shot the original gunman, Mr. de Aza, killing him at the scene. "He neutralized the threat," Mr. Velinor said. The bystander — who has been identified by police — left the scene before police arrived. He still has not been interviewed by police. "We're going to talking to him in the not too distant future," Mr. Velinor said.

Weeks after the shooting, Mr. Velinor said police have no motive for the bloody incident. "We are still trying to get information ... about what caused these individuals who were celebrating at this location to be shot. Anyone with information relative to this act, we are looking for them to come forward and provide us, as law enforcement with a level of support."

Senate Member Criticized Police for Long Silence About Gun Violence

Shortly after the bloody week of violence, Sen. Kenneth Gittens, himself a former law enforcement officer, criticized the police department for failing to provide information about the shootings to the public in a timely fashion. "I am very troubled by the lack of information and outreach from the Virgin Islands Police Department given that we are experiencing what seems to be a significant rise in crime these past weeks," Mr. Gittens said at the time.

The wave of gun violence beginning the week of Christmas left a total of five men dead.

"We had some very tragic situations here on St. Thomas during the time period, and we are seeking the public's assistance," the commissioner said.

Few Details Offered Regarding Other Shootings

The series of apparently unrelated shootings, beginning the week before Christmas, left five men dead and at least two others wounded, but alive. Two men were killed in separate shootings in Hospital Ground; one male was killed by gunfire in the Brookman Road area; and one man was murdered by a gunman in the Nadir Circle area, near the Bridge to Nowhere.

No arrests have been made.

Celebratory Gunfire Put the Public at Risk on New Year's Eve

Gunfire rang throughout territory streets on New Year's Eve, putting anyone nearby in harm's way, Mr. Velinor said. "These rounds - when you fire them up, they come down at some point. There are least a couple of homes that were compromised, where bullets actually came down through the roof."

"It alarms me that we have individuals who were stuck at church because they could not get home, children who could not come outside, because of celebratory gunfire," Mr. Velinor said.

Authorities scoured the streets in several St. Croix communities on New Year's Day searching for spent rounds of ammunition. The bullet casings will be cross-matched to shells found at crime scenes to see if the guns were used in any violent crimes.

The Non-Violent Part of the Crime Spree

Car thieves got in on the act, as well. Eleven vehicles were stolen from a rental car company on St. Thomas in December. Eight of those vehicles have been recovered, police said. Mr. Velinor asked the public's assistance in recovering the remaining three missing vehicles. No arrests have been made.

Praise for a Peaceful Crucian Festival

On a positive note, Mr. Velinor praised Virgin Islanders — particularly those attending the Crucian Christmas Festival — for a carnival free of serious violence. "We went through a very festive December carnival/Festival with no incidents of violence. We look forward to a 2020 that is a positive one for all."