



National Address

Dr. the Hon. Hubert Minnis

**Prime Minister
Commonwealth of The Bahamas**

**Monday, 29 January 2018
Nassau, The Bahamas**

Fellow Citizens and Residents:

Good evening.

A belated Happy New Year.

Upon our election to office, we pledged to listen to the voice, aspirations, dreams, hopes and desires of our people, and institute policies drawn from the vast experience of Bahamians at home, overseas, and including in the Diaspora.

We are listening to the voices of the people from Bain Town, to Marsh Harbour, to Freeport, to Exuma, Andros, and throughout the Bahamas, and from around the world.

Last May, I promised to address the nation at the beginning of the year and mid-year.

Tonight, I report to you on the work of the Government since May.

I also wish to report on our ambitious agenda for 2018.

Our economic recovery has a long way to go. Many Bahamians are still struggling. Unemployment remains too high.

But despite the long road ahead, recovery has begun and there are positive prospects on the horizon.

We are making progress.

Our first mission was to stabilize the economy and public finances in order to avoid a further downgrade by credit rating agencies. We still have a way to go to improve our fiscal health and to get our financial house in order. Through discipline and careful financial management we are steadily improving public finances, reducing waste and addressing corruption by public officials.

To protect our financial services industry, we took decisive action to avoid being blacklisted by the European Union and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.

2018 will be a year of growth, investment, and new jobs and economic opportunity.

My Government's major economic priorities are job-creation, opportunities for entrepreneurship, business development, and

promoting the ease of doing business in order to boost investment and improve productivity.

The Ease of Doing Business Committee, which was appointed soon after our election, has made a number of detailed significant recommendations to streamline various government regulations and processes.

My administration will aggressively respond to these critical recommendations for government reform and modernization.

After consultation with the Central Bank, there will be a relaxation of various exchange control transactions.

Without prior reference to the Central Bank, Bahamian-owned businesses will be allowed to maintain operating deposit accounts with up to \$100,000 in foreign currency at domestic commercial banks.

These accounts will have to be funded exclusively from revenues earned in foreign currency. This reform will go into effect on the first of February.

To streamline the business licence process, the Department of Inland Revenue is launching an initiative to make the business licence

approval process faster, and easier, by creating a single point for submission of all applications related to the opening of a business.

This will eliminate the need for visits to multiple agencies, and will provide a source of information where all the requirements for opening a business are clearly outlined.

The Department is running a pilot program and the new process is expected to be rolled out in the coming weeks.

The Government has engaged a leading firm to suggest options for tax reform, which will help to rationalize government finances.

Fellow-Bahamians and Residents:

In the tourism sector, Baha Mar launched a new global marketing campaign in November.

Grand Hyatt towers, which opened last year with 1,000 rooms, now has 1,800 rooms available.

The SLS Lux at Baha Mar opened in November. It is expected that Rosewood will open within the next several months.

Atlantis, Paradise Island, has also launched a global re-branding, and Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts has been contracted to manage the One and Only Ocean Club Resort.

Other investments in the pipeline include the 100-room condominium hotel and marina at the Pointe, and a 118-unit condo-hotel project by the Wynn Group at Gold Blossom, on West Bay Street.

We promised to give greater priority to initiatives to enliven and bring excitement to downtown Nassau and execute plans for the continued refurbishment of Festival Place.

We are already moving beyond this commitment and examining plans for the complete redevelopment of Prince George Dock and the surrounding areas.

We believe that the redevelopment of Prince George Dock is essential for the redevelopment of Downtown Nassau. The redevelopment of Downtown must go from east to west and north to south.

We promised to launch the rebound of the island of Grand Bahama in accordance with a master strategic plan designed for Grand Bahama,

and to establish a tourism signature identity in the marketplace for the Island of Grand Bahama.

The restoration of the economy of Grand Bahama is critical for the economic recovery of the Bahamas.

I am delighted to tell the people of Grand Bahama, and the people of the Bahamas, that our plan for Grand Bahama is well underway with the private acquisition and management of the Grand Lucayan assets, including the hotels, the golf courses and the casino.

Although this transaction is far from completed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that we will have accomplished in a few months what was not done in a decade.

This year, we intend to complete the sale of the Grand Lucayan and Memories property.

After they are reopened, the economy of Grand Bahama will improve significantly, including with a tremendous increase in employment and related business and economic opportunities.

We also promised to focus on the development of Freeport as the focus of an offshore technology hub.

Last week I led a delegation to Austin, Texas, one of the more prominent technology hubs in the United States.

While in Texas, we met with several companies that expressed interest in contributing to, and taking advantage of the opportunities that are developing in Freeport.

We have also successfully negotiated with Bahamas Paradise on the return of the Grand Celebration, and the introduction of a new vessel, the Grand Classica, which will bring additional stopover visitors to Grand Bahama.

In conjunction with the Ministry of Tourism, we negotiated additional airlift agreement with Sunwing, which should commence this year.

The Government has recently received an application in relation to West End, Grand Bahama, for the Grand Palm Beach property.

In 2008, the previous developer went into foreclosure and the Government has now been advised that Grand Palm Beach Acquisitions Ltd. has entered into a Purchase and Sale Agreement for the purchase of a large-scale resort known as “Ginn Sur Mer” in the West End of Grand Bahama.

Grand Beach Acquisitions Ltd. will construct, repair, revitalize, develop, and operate 246 rooms in three hotels,

a banquet facility, 116 branded hotel residences, 1,000 other residences, a hotel/casino site, approximately 150,000 square feet of shops and restaurants, a spa and wellness retreat, two marinas, an 18 hole golf course including driving range, an IFR-rated airport, a resort hospitality training academy, and an organic farm.

Grand Palm Beach Acquisitions Ltd. intends to repair, revitalize, and develop the Property to be known as “Bahama Bay” in nine phases over a 10 year period with a projected expenditure of Two Billion Five Hundred and Sixty Million Dollars.

The application is now before the National Economic Council to approve in principle, and to authorize the relevant government agencies to negotiate a Heads of Agreement on an expeditious basis.

There is new investment in East Grand Bahama at the oil refinery, which will help to provide a number of jobs.

To boost investment and growth, it is my intention to undertake several investment promotion trips abroad to include Canada, the United States, Europe, East Asia, and South America.

We look forward to the participation of the private sector in this initiative.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Access to affordable housing is critical for social and economic development. This year we will introduce an ambitious housing program.

Through this program, the Government will provide extremely low cost lots to potential first-time home owners in New Providence.

The lots will be supplied with necessary utilities. The homeowners will be responsible for building their own homes.

They may utilize their own architect or utilize pre-existing plans offered by the Government.

The potential homeowners will have two years to build their homes at duty free concessionary rates.

Because the lots will be inexpensive, we expect scores of first-time home owners to take advantage of this program.

The program will be extended to family Islands thus encouraging family island ownership, second home ownership, and entrepreneurship development of bed and breakfast properties.

This new program will decrease opportunities for corruption by public officials.

It will also mean less public funds directed to ongoing repairs at homes that were improperly built.

We look forward to many Bahamians taking advantage of this significant opportunity for homeownership.

Fellow-Bahamians and Residents:

To encourage business development and small business, the Government will this year waive the business license fee for new business.

To help with economic relief for small businesses, we will also waive for this year, the business license fee for businesses making under \$100,000.

These businesses will still have to go through the licensing process but will be exempt from the business license fee for 2018.

The Government committed to the enhancement and development of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, known as MSMEs.

I announce this evening that we have agreed to invest \$25 million dollars to help develop MSMEs.

This will amount to five million dollars a year, for the next five years. It will be funded from the sale of shares from Aliv and BTC.

This ambitious initiative will help stimulate the economy, and boost growth and employment. The initiative has several objectives.

We want to enhance business development MSMEs through innovative programs through joint ventures with the Government, the private sector and the University of The Bahamas, to help provide training and capacity-building for new and existing entrepreneurs.

The initiative will provide specific support for entrepreneurship and MSMEs development within marginalized groups, especially poorer communities and youth organizations.

This will include organizations that participate in the Over-the-Hill Community Development partnership program.

If you have dreamed of opening a business or you are an aspiring entrepreneur, I encourage you to look into this initiative.

Our goal is to foster a greater culture of entrepreneurship and innovation, while providing support to existing entrepreneur curricula-based programmes like Junior Achievement.

We will also introduce financial literacy, and entrepreneurship programmes in the primary, secondary and tertiary curricula.

Through this initiative we intend to promote greater linkages between Bahamian MSMEs and the domestic and international segments of the economy.

To help stimulate business ownership and Bahamian enterprise, the Cabinet has approved the launching of the Small Business Development Center of The Bahamas this year.

It is an initiative spearheaded by the Government in conjunction with the University of The Bahamas, and the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce and Employers' Confederation, with support from the Organization of American States.

This Center will provide a resource for all Bahamians to receive advisory and technical support when seeking to open a business or expand their operations.

The Center will steer entrepreneurs to available funding opportunities through government or private means.

It will also assist business owners in navigating through the regulatory and tax registration requirements for a new business.

Another bold reform measure by the Government was the introduction of the Commercial Enterprise Act.

This groundbreaking legislation will help Bahamians at home and in the Diaspora in the creation and development of small-and medium-sized businesses.

The Commercial Enterprise Act:

a. Encourages both domestic and foreign investment in The Bahamas;

b. Will allow for the creation of certain economic zones where deemed necessary throughout the country;

c. Targets specialized businesses in: Captive Insurance, Nanotechnology, Computer Technology, Software Design, Data Storage, Maritime Trade, Aviation Registration, Wealth Management, and Manufacturing Enterprises.

The Commercial Enterprise Act will help to encourage investment in The Bahamas, and places a high level of prioritization on Bahamian labour and talent.

To improve transparency and to help small business to bid for government contracts, the eProcurement and Supplier Registry system will create a unique means of access that is simple and easy to use.

This registry will reduce barriers to access for small and medium-sized enterprises and will allow the entire procurement process to be managed electronically.

Users will therefore be able to access tender advertising, submit bids and be advised of the awarding of contracts electronically.

The projected date for the launch of the first phase of the Supplier Registry, which involves business registration only, is February 5th, 2018.

Phase Two, full tendering, will commence mid-2018.

On January 13, the Ministry of Labour and the Department of Labour launched the first of its Public Employment Services (PES) initiatives: “Labour on the Blocks”.

The initiative attracted over 400 Bain and Grants Town residents to the Sarah Ingraham Park at Hospital and Cambridge Lanes.

This new program will utilize community parks to register jobseekers in the Department of Labour's data base.

The Ministry of Labour was very pleased with the turnout, and that hundreds of job seekers registered with the PES. We are also pleased with the level of private sector participation.

The second initiative in this series by the Ministry of Labour was held last Saturday at the Kendal Isaacs Gym from 12 noon to 4:00 pm.

This event, a Construction Job Fair was designed for jobseekers in the construction industry to register with the PES. A number of construction companies participated in the event.

In the first quarter of this year, the Department of Labour in conjunction with the National Training Agency, will re-launch the Employability Component of the Citizen Security & Justice Program.

The Citizen Security and Justice Program, has the general objective of reducing crime and violence in the Bahamas.

It is an ambitious social intervention program. The specific objectives of the program are to:

- (i) improve behaviors for non-violent conflict resolution in New Providence;
- (ii) increase employability and employment of the at-risk youth population in New Providence;
- (iii) strengthen institutional capabilities of justice services; and
- (iv) reduce the recidivism rate among individuals within the prison system.

This initiative targets five hundred at-risk individuals between the ages of 17 – 29. These individuals will participate in a fourteen (14) week Soft Skills Training Module at the National Training Agency.

Upon successful completion, participants will then move on to an “On the Job Apprenticeship Program”.

This bold and revolutionary component, enables participants to be paid a stipend, while at the same time gain work experience.

The Citizen Security and Justice initiative is both a social development and an economic development program, which has great promise to reduce crime and increase employment for at-risk youth.

My fellow Bahamians:

In 2015, the city of Nassau was identified for inclusion in the Inter-American Development Bank's Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative.

The Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative was created by the IDB in 2010 as a technical assistance program in response to rapid and largely unregulated urbanization in the Latin America and Caribbean Region.

Among the priority actions identified for the City of Nassau was the improvement of the city's management and governance.

A special study was recommended and commissioned to explore the issues and options relevant to the introduction of local government in New Providence.

I am pleased to advise that in a matter of weeks, my Cabinet will be reviewing the results of the study, detailing options and models for local government in New Providence.

This preliminary study was conducted by a consultant engaged by the Inter-American Development Bank, in collaboration with the Office of the Prime Minister and the Department of Local Government.

There will be a series of public consultations within the first quarter of this year. We remain resolute in our intention to introduce local government to New Providence.

Fellow-Bahamians and Residents:

Protecting the citizens of a nation is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of a government.

My Government places a high priority on public safety and national security. Crime is a dynamic and complex occurrence.

In order to successfully combat the criminal elements of today, we must keep in touch with what is happening on our streets, and devise workable responses based on an examination of emerging trends.

As a result of re-focused actions, the police with continued assistance from the general public, the new Police Commissioner has reported an overall decrease in crime by 13 percent compared to 2016.

Although homicides increased by 10 percent last year, we were pleased to experience a significant lull toward the end of 2017.

The operations of the Guns & Gang and Rapid Response Units established last year, also helped with the reduced level of crime and violence.

Gun and drug seizures were significant as local and international law enforcement partners strengthened their partnerships.

The crime fight rests not only with the police but with all citizens, and the soon to be launched National Neighbourhood Watch Council, will better empower citizens and residents in crime prevention.

In 2018, my Government will make significant investments in new equipment and technology for the Police Force.

The Cabinet recently approved a \$5.9 million new vehicle fleet. This will be followed by renovation of the many dilapidated buildings currently occupied by police officers.

The Force's Training Programme will be revitalized where all ranks will be exposed to best practices in law enforcement training.

The Government will soon review the Police Manpower Audit which will determine the appropriate number of officers required to effectively police our nation.

The Audit will not only end the need for prescribed promotion dates determined by politicians but create a fair process that is based on vacancies.

We will prepare capable officers for future leadership through a Succession Plan, where only the most competent officers are selected to lead the Royal Bahamas Police Force.

On behalf of the Government, I thank our law enforcement officers and officials, along with their families, for their dedicated service.

My Government has pledged our commitment to ensuring that our borders are properly protected.

The Royal Bahamas Defence Force is coordinating the development and implementation of a multi-law enforcement agency, Unmanned Aerial System programme, to assist our law enforcement agencies with detecting, tracking, and intercepting criminals engaged in illicit activities at sea and ashore.

The Force's Rangers programme is being transformed into a Rangers National Youth Service Programme. The nationally acclaimed programme is designed to instill and develop leadership, character and employability, as well as business skills among our nation's youth.

With 33 schools involved in New Providence and 22 schools in six Family Islands, the programme expanded into North Andros, Eleuthera, and Long Island last year. It will develop partnerships with BAIC, BAMSI and BTVI.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Rejuvenating Over-The-Hill communities is a mammoth undertaking. It will not be completed overnight.

But through medium- and long-term efforts, Over-the-Hill communities can be revitalized.

Building on previous efforts, including road and infrastructural works by previous administrations, the current government is committed to improving the quality of life and expanding opportunities for residents Over-The-Hill.

The Government is committed to a structured program of revitalization.

The building of a new multi-facility community center Over-the-Hill will help provide young people with a safe space to do homework, or engage in youth development, and social intervention programs, including healing, health and wellness initiatives.

The new center will be a hub of activity for the community, providing counseling and rehabilitation services, as well as elder and

child care. The center will also provide opportunities for various sports and other activities.

The goal is to help more young people to lead healthier lives, and to refrain or turn away from gang involvement, enabling them to imagine new possibilities for their lives.

The Citizen Safety and Justice Program will be conducted in unison with these efforts.

This government will create target tax incentives throughout the inner-cities to encourage new jobs and economic growth in these communities.

The development of a Native Food Market will also help in the economic revitalization of Over-the-Hill.

Affordable housing will be a part of our comprehensive plan.

The Government will work with community and church leaders, business people, academics, artists and urban renewal experts to develop plans for revitalizing Over-the-Hill.

Critical to the Government's plans, are the four pillars for youth development. These include:

- Education, Training and Skills Development;
- Youth Development Programs;
- Social Inclusion and Intervention Programs; and
- Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Initiatives.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents;

On 27th January, 2014, the previous government entered into an agreement with Renew Bahamas Limited to operate the New Providence Sanitary Landfill which commenced on 1st August, 2014.

However, its management was replete with significant challenges. The previous government found itself rescuing Renew from its woes by putting out fires, paying contractors, and providing a loan to pay its Bahamian staff and service providers to keep the landfill in operation.

You will recall that Hurricane Matthew hit The Bahamas on 6th October, 2016. This increased the waste at the landfill significantly.

By the 11th October, 2016, Renew advised that it could no longer fulfill its obligations under the contract, and pulled out of The Bahamas.

On the 31st October, 2016, the Department of Environmental Health Services resumed responsibility for management and operations of the activities at the New Providence Sanitary Landfill.

It is no secret that the New Providence Landfill has been plagued with intermittent fires.

On the 5th March, 2017, a massive fire broke out at the landfill that burned for approximately three weeks.

The fire caused an evacuation order and displacement of Jubilee Garden residents; came close to nearby gas companies; caused the closure of neighboring businesses and schools; challenged fire fighters; and sparked an understandable public outcry for resolution to this vexing problem.

Subsequent to an unsuccessful tender process by the previous government, this Government released a press statement last June, outlining the short and long term goals of the Government to address the challenges and remediate the landfill problem,

One of the short-term goals of the Government was to issue a new RFP for the management of the entire site.

In November, 2017, we published requests for proposals in the local newspapers. A total of eighteen companies responded. These documents are being reviewed by the Selection Committee recommended by the Cabinet of the Bahamas.

A shortlist of potential investors is currently being prepared. The proposals will then be evaluated by the Selection Committee. A preferred bidder will be selected by May of this year.

Once the government is informed of the results, we will report which firm the Government has selected to enter into an agreement to manage, deconstruct and operate the New Providence Sanitary Landfill.

Fellow-Bahamians and Residents:

In the weeks ahead, the Government will report to you on a timeline for the restoration of Ragged Island.

We will also report on our program to remove shantytowns.

A Cabinet Committee has already produced a detailed report that has been discussed by the Cabinet.

The Minister of Works will inform the public in more detail on a scheduled program for the repair of roads in New Providence.

During the year we will also make announcements on energy sector reform and solarization, education reform, Family Island Development and public sector reform.

My Government is fully committed to keeping you informed. We will continue to be a transparent and accountable government.

We are a government of service not entitlement.

Unlike some others, we expect Members of Parliament to be responsible and to pay their electricity and other bills like any other citizen or resident.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

To build a new Bahamas is about more than jobs and economic development.

As important, it is about the kind of society we wish to be.

Let us commit ourselves to volunteer and be involved in community service.

Let us respect each other and act with civility by, for example obeying traffic laws, and by not parking in spaces reserved for people with disabilities.

I heard a story recently about a woman who went to relicense her car. A young man approached her and asked if she wanted him to remove the old sticker and apply the new sticker.

The woman told the young man, who was about 19 or so, that she didn't have any cash to pay him.

He responded: "That's okay, Ma'am, it isn't all about money.

She then said, I don't know if I'll be able to get back to pay you.

His response: "That's okay. Do something nice for someone else. That will be good enough payment for me."

This is the best of the Bahamian Spirit, which can be found in many wonderful Bahamians, who are a great promise and gift to our nation.

Our great ambition as a people must not only be about economic recovery.

Let us aim also for the recovery of civility; the recovery of our social fabric; the recovery of the community and a genuine sense of the common good.

Let me close by thanking my colleagues and our public officers for their hard work and dedicated services.

While we have some distance to go in improving our Bahamas, we are well on the way.

We are embarked on the important work of reforming, modernizing and transforming our Bahamas to make us world-class.

I assure you that I will devote my every energy to ensuring opportunity for all Bahamians, especially poorer Bahamians, and our children and youth.

May God continue to bless and guide our Bahamas.

Thank you and good evening.