

Remarks of U.S. Consul General  
Valerie Belon  
On March 16, 2011  
To the Rotary Club of Bonaire

Thank you so much for welcoming me to your club, especially on relatively short notice. I met some of your members just this past weekend at the Rotary leadership seminar in Curacao and I've met some others on other occasions. Whenever I travel, I make it a priority to visit civil society organizations – particularly Rotary, whenever I can, since I am a Rotarian. I feel that service clubs and civil society organizations play a critical role in any community. Indeed, they can be what makes a “place” into a “community.” I think this stems from the fact that communities are made up of members who care about the whole enough to invest time and resources into making that place better over the long-term. Not every place is a community, because some unfortunately lack that community spirit, but I can tell that Bonaire certainly falls into that special category of communities with plenty of spirit and I'm glad to find that.

Actually, it makes me feel right at home. You see, I'm from – not just a place, but a small community myself. One that is similar to Bonaire in the sense that it is small and increasingly dependent on tourism. The place I am from has one big – no let's call a spade a spade – an ENORMOUS difference and that concerns Bonaire's idyllic climate. The place I am from does not have that. I've only been here a few hours, but I can already see that Bonaire has an abundance of beauty in addition to its wonderful spirit. The other similarity of my home town is the warmth of the people here. Open, friendly, and happy to start a conversation with any visitor. It is a nice welcome to receive. You'll understand what I mean about similarities and differences when I tell you that I was born and raised in Fairbanks, Alaska. If I had told you that right off, then you might have thought there is no place more different than Bonaire, but I'm telling you that is not true. Fairbanks only has about 35,000 residents, but every one of them makes up for that smallness with extra personality and character. Just about anyone who has been there can verify this. You don't have to take my word for it. Even at the height of our summer tourist season, I don't think you'll find more than 60,000 people in the greater Fairbanks urban area. And we do get a lot of tourists. That is part of the reason that I feel so at home here in the Dutch Caribbean.

Let me tell you a bit more about myself. After attending Princeton University and getting my MBA at the University of California Los Angeles, I joined the State Department just over 20 years ago. Twenty years moving around the globe as an American diplomat is a long time and I have many experiences to draw from to help me accomplish our goals here in the Dutch Caribbean. I started out my career in the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) and most of my most exciting and exotic stories are from the two years I spent there. I spent six years of my career in another exotic location – ok, maybe not so exotic, but certainly a dangerous jungle called

Washington, DC. Before coming to the Consulate in Curacao, I also served overseas in Belize, Panama and Paris. What is particularly helpful to me here is the knowledge and experience I gained from my service in the Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the year I spent helping the new Obama Administration prepare for the Fifth Summit of the Americas held in April 2009 in Trinidad. President Obama's first trip to the larger region included the Caribbean. This emphasized the importance we place on the Caribbean and our determination to work as partners to tackle common challenges. This theme of partnership – breaking the tradition of us-them, north-south, first-third – was woven throughout all the initiatives that the Obama Administration rolled out at the Summit and continues today through things like the Partnership for Prosperity, the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas, and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative.

Finally, I'd like to tell you a bit about how I see the top two priorities of the U.S. Consulate General based in Curacao. Even as a small consulate with limited staff and resources, we try to accomplish many things, but the reality of our limited resources and our status as a Consulate and not an Embassy inspired me to define our core areas of focus, our top priorities. First, let me explain that we are what we call an "odd duck" meaning we don't fit into the usual State Department categories of Embassies and other diplomatic missions. I am both Consul General and Chief of Mission because – unlike almost all consulates, I do not report to our Ambassador to the Kingdom based in The Hague. Rather, I report directly to Washington, DC. So, in that sense, the consulate operates much like an Embassy, albeit on a much much smaller scale.

Like all good Embassies, we have core focus areas. I have identified two. First, we maintain good cooperation and a network of partnerships to fight trafficking, including trafficking in persons, but particularly narcotics trafficking in the region. Key elements of this are the two Forward Operating Locations that we maintain on Curacao and – much smaller but just as important – on Aruba. These are multinational facilities working directly with a counter drug center based in Key West, Florida, where U.S. military sit along French, Colombian, British, Dutch and other nationalities to coordinate intelligence and efforts to fight drug trafficking. The air operations conducted thanks to the servicing, refueling, maintenance, and repair work that is done at the FOLs extends the reach of our aerial surveillance, detection and monitoring of illicit trafficking. Once spotted, information about suspect vessels or aircraft is turned over to the appropriate law enforcement authorities depending on the jurisdiction. For instance, there are often Colombian "host nation riders" on board AWACS planes that help to pass key information so that Colombian law enforcement can make arrests and seizures. Last year alone, we estimate that the FOLs contributed to the seizure of over \$3 billion worth of illicit narcotics. Imagine for a minute - \$3 billion! The FOLs are but one tool in our counternarcotics toolbox. We also have an office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration based at our Consulate and they are but one U.S. agency that has excellent relations with local law enforcement which is key to addressing the counternarcotics challenge. Let's face it, even if drugs were legalized tomorrow

(and we all know that will not happen, nor am I suggesting it) even if drugs were legalized tomorrow the criminal networks that control their supply and transportation are vast, complex and strong. They will not disappear overnight no matter how we change the legal context. As long as people are still willing to pay for drugs and take risks to use them, we must work together to strengthen our information and intelligence sharing as well as our law enforcement cooperation and resources. We have to face and deal with the reality that drug traffickers are well armed, rich and willing to take huge risks to reap what are often huge financial rewards.

Our other main area of focus relates closely to tourism. It is my priority to ensure to the maximum extent possible the safety and security of all American citizens either residing in or visiting my consular district. For the time being, I continue to cover all six islands of the Dutch Caribbean, that is Aruba and the five islands of the former Netherlands Antilles notwithstanding the fact that the Netherlands Antilles no longer exist. Washington understands – indeed, a big part of my job over the last several months has been explaining to Washington that Curacao and St. Maarten are now separate, semi-autonomous entities, yet remaining part of the Kingdom. Even though Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius are now more closely tied to the Netherlands, Washington currently has no plans to take them out of my area of responsibility. The consulate has always worked in close cooperation with our Embassy in The Hague. The dissolution process only adds emphasis to the importance of continuing to do so.

Focusing on maximum safety and security for American citizens on islands like Bonaire means spreading the word far and wide that the Consulate stands ready to assist whenever (yes, that means 24/7, 365 days a year) whenever an American needs us. We provide what we like to call “cradle to grave” services to American citizens, providing Consular Reports of Birth Abroad or Consular Reports of Death Abroad, which are key documents families need to substantiate citizenship claims or resolve estates. We also remind local authorities that police and prison officials have a responsibility to inform us promptly whenever an American citizen is arrested. According to the Hague Convention, we should be notified within 48 hours and, although we cannot give legal advice or counsel, we are Congressionally-mandated to visit American citizen prisoners quarterly. We don’t currently have any American citizen prisoners on Bonaire, fortunately for them, but perhaps bad for us since it would mean more reasons to visit more often. Greater safety and security is a common interest we all have. Particularly since it would help tourism, I often ask local hotel managers and other tourism industry leaders to help us keep an eye out for Americans, think of ways to improve their security, and – above all – never hesitate to contact the consulate when they need assistance. Often times, it is a hotel manager, a dive operator, or a taxi driver who first becomes aware of a situation that involves the death or arrest of an American. Please help us by reporting this to the Consulate either by calling +5999-461-3066 during business hours, +5999-510-6870 after normal working hours, or our email: [ACSCuracao@state.gov](mailto:ACSCuracao@state.gov)

At this point, I would like to conclude by thanking you again for your warm welcome. I would be happy to take any questions.