

CARIBBEAN: Former diplomat concerned about region's stance on Falklands

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Former Caribbean diplomat Sir Ron Sanders. *Photo credit: www.caribbeannetnews.com

BRIDGETOWN, Barbados, CMC – Former Caribbean diplomat Sir Ron Sanders has expressed concern about the stance taken by regional leaders in support of Argentina in its dispute with the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands, saying it appears to run counter to their own national interests.

Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders, who met with their Latin American counterparts in Mexico earlier this week, signed a declaration that “confirmed their support of Argentina’s legitimate rights in the sovereignty dispute with the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands Issue”.

They also recalled “regional interest in having the governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom resume negotiations to find a fair, peaceful and definitive solution to the dispute over the sovereignty”.

But Sir Ron said while it was understandable for Latin American countries to support Argentina, the support of CARICOM countries “for Argentina’s ‘legitimate rights’ is puzzling”.

“Both the UK and Argentina have claimed the Falklands/Malvinas for almost two hundred years. So what now makes Argentina’s rights more ‘legitimate’ than Britain’s? And, why call for ‘negotiations’ between Argentina and Britain to find ‘a fair peaceful and definitive solution’ to the dispute if it has already been decided that Argentina’s rights are ‘legitimate’?”

“Unless there is something they have not made public, this position by Caribbean governments appears on the surface to run counter to their own national interests,” he added in a commentary on the latest development.

The former Antigua and Barbuda High Commissioner to London also pointed out that the national interests of 12 of the 14 independent CARICOM countries “are much more bound-up with Britain than they are with Argentina.

“CARICOM’s trade with Britain far exceeds trade with Argentina; investment in CARICOM countries from Britain is much greater than any investment from Argentina; official development assistance from Britain to CARICOM countries directly and indirectly (through the European Union and the Commonwealth for instance) is much larger than any assistance from Argentina.

“The number of tourists from Britain to CARICOM countries is considerably greater than from Argentina; and far more CARICOM nationals live, work and study in Britain than in Argentina,” he said.

Sir Ron said what appears to have triggered the discussion was the fact that a British oil exploration company, Desire Petroleum Plc, announced that it had started drilling for oil 60 miles (100 kilometers) north of the Falklands/Malvinas and that Argentina objects to the development.

He warned that by giving support to Argentina, CARICOM countries run the risk of compromising their own interest.

“For instance, where would they stand if Venezuela objected to oil exploration off part of Guyana, despite long-standing international arbitrations and agreements confirming Guyana’s title? Also, where would these countries stand if Venezuela objected to oil explorations that might be granted by some of them near Aves Island/Bird Rock to which Venezuela lays a claim? In the case of Belize where Guatemala claims the entire country, the same argument applies,” the former diplomat said.

Meantime, he did not seem too bothered by the creation of a new grouping of Latin American and Caribbean countries that was spawned at the Mexico gathering.

The group comprised of 32 nations drawn from the Rio Group and CARICOM excludes the United States and Canada and has been described in some quarters as an alternative to the Organisation of American States (OAS).

But Sir Ron said the new group’s formation created nothing more than a “talk shop”.

“...no one should believe that it will be anything more than an opportunity for dialogue at the level of leaders,” he said.

“It will have no secretariat and therefore little means of implementing decisions; decisions will have to be made by consensus, therefore no binding decisions will be made; and, in truth, the grouping is so amorphous and made up of countries at such different levels of development and with such differing interests and ambitions, that its meetings will be largely obligatory and its decisions only declaratory.”

However, Sir Ron said CARICOM countries ought to recognise the benefits of being members of the OAS.

“Certainly for CARICOM countries, there is no other organization in which they can engage the US government on a regular and sustained basis at all levels. That alone makes the OAS worthwhile for them.

“Further, CARICOM governments greatly value their relations with Canada which has been an ally and partner for generations in the Hemisphere and in the Commonwealth. They would want deeper not distant relations with Canada,” he added.