

Tobago seeing hotel cancellations, says Williams



Tobago chairman of the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce, Curtis Williams PHOTO BY ELIZABETH GONZALES

GEISHA KOWLESSAR-ALONZO SENIOR REPORTER
GEISHA.KOWLESSAR@GUARDIAN.CO.TT

Hotel cancellations are affecting Tobago's tourism sector as the island finds itself on the front lines of a deepening regional crisis.

Following the dramatic US military extraction of deposed Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro on January 3, international travellers have been pulling out of bookings, citing fears of a "second wave" of instability in the Southern Caribbean.

Speaking on CNC3's The Morning Brew programme yesterday, Curtis Williams, chairman of the Tobago Division of the T&T Chamber of Industry and Commerce, confirmed that the fallout is hitting the island's premier accommodations hard.

"The tension between Venezuela and the US is really affecting us and it definitely moved from our hotels, because some of our hotels, the guests did

cancel and that would go into the cruise ship environment.

“We even had a conference here sometime later on this month and because, in that conference, I think one or two members of the team were US based, they decided that it’s in their best interest they cancel, because the tension is growing. There is going to be a second wave. We don’t know when the second wave is going to be. And that tension if you are really coming into a region where the uncertainty is there. And you would definitely, definitely cancel your plans,” Williams explained.

The timing could not be worse for Tobago, as the cancellations coincide with the peak winter season and the lead-up to Carnival.

Compounding the issue is a chronic payment delay from state agencies like the Tobago House of Assembly (THA).

The Tobago business grouping is also calling out the THA for its failure to create a reliable financial ecosystem. Contractors report being caught in a “cokey-eye” stare down with banks, who are increasingly hesitant to lend against THA commitment letters because payments are frequently delayed by seven to eight months.

“You don’t always get payments on time and so the banks always look at you with a cokey eye in the local parlance. So it’s important that when we get these commitments from the THA and we take it to the financial institution, the financial institution could say, okay, yes, this looks solid. So I can advance you some money to start the project as the case may be and so forth. These kinds of commitments and this enabling environment is very difficult,” Williams further explained.

Logistics also remain a “total disaster.”

With the current cargo vessel set to depart on January 12 and a replacement not expected until later this month, a critical supply gap looms.

Williams is urging the incoming administration to prioritise a seamless air and sea bridge.

“We’re trying to find a centre spot that we could really make this thing work for us. So we’re asking the THA, the new administration, pay a little bit of focus on the logistics in moving people between Trinidad and Tobago, whether it’s the sea bridge or the air bridge, because tourism plays an

important part to us. And if we don't, if folks don't have confidence in coming across to the island, whether international or domestic, then they won't come," Williams added.