Bahamas Statement to IMO- High Level Meeting to Address Unsafe Mixed Migration by Sea, 4-5 March 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

Distinguish delegates, good Afternoon. Mr. Secretary-General, The Bahamas wishes to congratulate you and the Secretariat of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) for bringing together member governments, industry partners and all of the relevant bodies of the United Nations to raise awareness and to try and find solutions to what is a most troubling and deadly migration across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. We are reminded always as to the huge cost in lost lives, to the budget busting cost to the various Coast Guards and governments involved and the cost in time and commercial considerations to the shipping and operating companies who have to divert from their passage to lend assistance to those in distress sometimes at great peril to the officers and crew. A look at the focal points for unsafe mixed migration by Sea reveals that the Caribbean is a name area for such activity and The Bahamas in particular is both a country of transition and destination. This is a vexing, unsatisfactory and costly situation that The Bahamas has had to and is dealing with ever since we became an Independent Nation in 1973.

Mr. Chairman,

In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September, the Hon. Frederick Mitchell, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, noted that “the control of illegal immigration is central to our survivability as a country…” The Minister stated that the Government of The Bahamas would seek strict adherence to measures undertaken to stop the flow of undocumented non-nationals into Bahamian territory. In an effort to address this matter in a transparent and fair manner, The Bahamas has entered into agreements with its immediate neighbours, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the Turks and Caicos Island and Haiti, with a view to identifying positive solutions to the challenges of illegal migration, while reaffirming the good relations which exist between our countries.

In the reports of both the outgoing Chairman and that of the Director General of the IOM, The Bahamas was pleased to note the reference to “Taking Geneva to the field.” The Bahamas considers that a strategic initiative to give greater attention to the challenges on the ground, of those forced to leave their home country due to natural disasters or political or economic hardship is of the utmost importance. The many migratory concerns, which arise from unhealthy environments, limited food, water and shelter, xenophobia on the part of those in the host country and those who arrive on their shores, make it imperative for an effective and efficient migration management programme, aimed at improving conditions for those who are displaced and those who are most vulnerable.

Mr. Chairman,

The Government of The Bahamas continues to grapple with the enormous burden of illegal migration. In this year alone, some 3000 persons have been repatriated at an unsustainable cost to the Government. Nevertheless, The Bahamas has worked with receiving governments for the smooth return of their nationals.

The Government of The Bahamas has taken steps to stem the tide of boatloads of migrants who arrive illegally on its shores with the acquisition of ten patrol vessels of
which two vessels have already been commissioned and the expectation is that over
the period of the next seven years the remaining eight patrol vessels will be bought
into service. This matter remains a national security concern and the Government is
resolute in its decision on this matter.

Mr. Chairman,

The Bahamas wishes to express its thanks and appreciation to the Government of The
United States for its continued co-operation and support, especially the close working
arrangement with the Coast Guard.

The position of the Coast Guard Liaison Officer (CGLO) was established in Nassau as
part of continuing efforts to work with the Government of the Commonwealth of The
Bahamas, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Royal Bahamas Defense Force (RBDF) and
other maritime law enforcement partners including the Royal Bahamas Police Force
(RBPF) Bahamas Customs and Immigration Departments, regarding matters of
interest to both our nations involving maritime issues.

The Coast Guard Liaison Officer is the U.S. Government's representative for all Coast
Guard issues in the Bahamas with the exception of the counter-drug mission. Most of
the work of the Coast Guard Liaison Officer involves coordinating maritime illegal
immigration issues. The Liaison Officer is also responsible for search and rescue, aids
to navigation, vessel safety, and marine environmental protection as well as being
responsible for handling all the clearance requests for Coast Guard cutters, aircraft,
and personnel transiting to and through The Bahamas. The Coast Guard provides
subject matter experts for a large number of courses provided to maritime law
enforcement partners.

Because search and rescue is such an important mission to the Coast Guard, the
Liaison Officer also works closely with the RBDF and with the volunteer organization,
BASRA (Bahamas Air Sea Rescue Association), to coordinate search and rescue
assistance in The Bahamas

Major Issues

The US and The Bahamas maintain a close working relationship with regard to
migrant issues. Illegal migrants continue to be smuggled into the Bahamas and TCI.
While many migrants stay in the Bahamas or TCI, most attempt to use the region as a
transfer location to facilitate attempts to reach the United States. The U.S. Coast
Guard assists in transporting migrants located in remote areas, particularly from the
Cay Sal Bank, to Bahamas Immigration officials at the nearest port.

The U.S. Coast Guard has a long-standing relationship with the RBDF because of their
unique similarity as an armed service that conducts both law enforcement and national
defense. The CGLO and Navy Liaison Office (NLO) work closely together to improve
relationships and performance of the service. A prime example of this cooperation is
the Shiprider Program where RBDF officers ride on U.S. Coast Guard Cutters each
day to assist with enforcement of laws inside Bahamian territorial waters.

The Coast Guard is closely partnered with the Royal Bahamas Police Force, most
notably with OPBAT (Operations Bahamas / Turks & Caicos). Both organizations work
closely together combating the flow of illegal contraband and migrants throughout the
region. The USCG and RBPF also partner on other maritime law enforcement matters
such as stolen vessels and trafficking in persons.
Search and Rescue (SAR): Any SAR cases involving Coast Guard assets in The Bahamas, is coordinated with the Bahamian government. The RBDF is the official SAR coordinator for maritime events in the Bahamas. As such, all search and rescue assistance by the Coast Guard is coordinated with the RBDF.

Mr. Chairman,

Within the margins of the UNGA earlier this year, The Bahamas’ Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration and the IOM Director General signed a Memorandum of Understanding to strengthen existing co-operation between the Government of The Bahamas and IOM, in matters of mutual concern in relation to migration management, including that of identifying measures to assist and protect vulnerable migrants. The Bahamas will continue to collaborate with the IOM to enhance disaster risk reduction and resilience in the face of climate change and environmental degradation.

The Bahamas wishes to express its appreciation to the IOM for its commitment to this agreement which was demonstrated by the recent visit to The Bahamas by Deputy Director General, Laura Thompson, from 16 to 19 November, 2014. The Bahamas took the opportunity to reiterate its commitment to the initiative on “Regional Cooperation and Law Enforcement Integration to Combat Irregular Migration and Smuggling between Haiti, The Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands”, an initiative to support the Government of Haiti in addressing irregular migration. The IOM’s Programme for Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration and the opportunities available to exchange views and best practices among regional partners, through the Regional Consultative Process were also considered.

The Bahamas therefore, takes this opportunity to commend the IOM for the important work undertaken around the world to assist countries in their efforts to manage migration, in particular, The Bahamas, as it continues to partner with IOM and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to alleviate this problem. The Bahamas reaffirms the wish to strengthen its association through further cooperation in the area of capacity building and The Bahamas reiterates the need for increased dialogue between the sending, transit and destination countries to ensure that effective measures are identified to reduce the flow of illegal migrants.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, The Bahamas wishes to support the IOM as the principal global agency for migration management. With respect to the on-going dialogue on the IOM-UN relations and the IOM strategy, The Bahamas underscores the need to ensure that migrants are granted the necessary assistance, as currently provided by the IOM and that there is not a shift away from this support, given a revised structure.

Mr. Chairman,

As you may imagine the cost of Search and Rescue =, apprehension, housing and repatriation comes at a heavy financial cost to the Bahamas; during his mid-year budget communication to Parliament, the Minister of Immigration and Foreign Affairs indicated that his Ministry has already exhausted the $1.5 million dollars, allocated for Repatriation for the year. The Ministry then has to compete for additional funding with Education, Health, Transportation and Communication and all other vital services to the people of the Bahamas.

Mr. Chairman
We shall continue to do our bit as a responsible Member of the United Nations and the IMO, and we will support the outcome of this conference and support our European
and North African Friends, as we seek to deal with this troubling and tragic issue of Migrants by sea from North Africa to Europe. We hope for a successful conference and with helpful outcome.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.