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**Pacific regional seminar on the implementation of the Fourth International
Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism:
innovative steps to ensure the attainment of the Sustainable Development
Goals in the Non-Self-Governing Territories**

**Bali, Indonesia
24 to 26 May 2023**

STATEMENT BY

MR. BENITO WHEATLEY

(BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS)



**C-24 PACIFIC REGIONAL SEMINAR ON DECOLONIZATION
BALI, INDONESIA
24TH MAY 2023**

QUESTION OF THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

MR. BENITO WHEATLEY, SPECIAL ENVOY OF THE PREMIER

INTERVENTION

Madam Chair

Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

Ladies and Gentleman

A pleasant good afternoon

Madam Chair, I would like to begin by thanking the Government and people of the Republic of Indonesia for their warm hospitality here on the beautiful island of Bali. I also want to thank you and the entire C-24 Bureau, and Secretariat, for your tireless efforts to organise this Pacific regional seminar on decolonization and for facilitating the participation of representatives of the Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs), including my own delegation.

Excellencies, the British Virgin Islands takes its obligations to update the members of the United Nations (UN) Special Committee on Decolonization extremely seriously. This is why our delegation has made the very long journey to this part of the world to share with you firsthand the very important developments in the Territory that have taken place in recent months.

It is our hope that the information provided will be useful to you in preparing a draft UN resolution on the Question of the British Virgin Islands for consideration at the substantive session of the C-24 in New York in June.

It is imperative that the aspirations and concerns of the British Virgin Islands are reflected in the draft which will eventually receive the stamp of approval of the international community when finally adopted at the 78th UN General Assembly later this year.

I want to begin my update by clarifying that the UN decolonization framework is still applicable to the British Virgin Islands and continues to be highly relevant in the Caribbean where the decolonization process remains incomplete.

I also want to clarify that the British Virgin Islands does not receive grant in aid or any budgetary support from the United Kingdom (UK). We have been financially and economically self-sufficient since 1978 and qualify for very little development assistance, except small biodiversity projects implemented by NGOs. Decolonization in our case is primarily a question of changing political status.

Excellencies, you will recall that just over a year ago at the Caribbean Regional Seminar on Decolonization in Saint Lucia, we addressed the crisis caused by a Commission of Inquiry report on governance in the Territory that recommended the UK impose direct rule over the British Virgin Islands.

The UK rightly did not pursue direct rule, which was vehemently opposed by CARICOM, OECS, the Caribbean Territories, the University of the West Indies and the C-24. The Government of Saint Lucia as country host played a lead role in discouraging this retrograde step from being taken against the British Virgin Islands.

Democratic governance in the Territory was preserved and a Government of National Unity developed a reform programme for immediate implementation. Despite this, the UK unfortunately approved an Order in Council in reserve that can immediately suspend the constitution at their discretion, which continues to hang over the head of the British Virgin Islands like the sword of Damocles.

The position of CARICOM and OECS on this matter has been consistent. The Order in Council in reserve should be removed without delay and the right of the people of the British Virgin Islands to self-determination under the UN Charter should be respected, as well as all relevant UN conventions and resolutions concerning the Territory. The C-24 has also expressed its concern about the Order.

Present at this seminar are delegates from Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Dominica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Montserrat, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The British Virgin Islands is grateful for your unwavering support and that of the members of the Special Committee.

Over the past year, the Territory's political leadership has heeded the wishes of the people of the British Virgin Islands who want their Government to put in place stronger checks and balances, increase transparency, improve the delivery of public services and uphold integrity in public life.

Things are going in the right direction, despite the need for extension of some reform deadlines, and every effort is being made to accelerate the reform process, while respecting the legitimate expectation of the public to be consulted on changes affecting them.

The democratic will of the people of the British Virgin Islands was also clearly demonstrated on 24th April when voters peacefully went to the polls to elect a new Government. Election Observers deemed the General Election to be free and fair. While voter turnout was lower than the previous election, the people exercised their democratic right to elect their representatives to the Territory's parliament at the Fifth House of Assembly.

Dr. the Honourable Natalio D. Wheatley was sworn in as Premier of the British Virgin Islands on 25th April, along with his Ministerial colleagues. The new Administration has a fresh mandate to continue the reform process and to transition the British Virgin Islands to a more diversified, tourism led, investment driven low carbon economy that delivers business and job opportunities for the people of the Territory. A strong focus will also be placed on implementing a National Sustainable Development launched in February following the generous support received from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

While the impending threat of the UK Order in Council in reserve has receded somewhat, it has not gone away. The elected arm of Government maintains that it is undemocratic and unnecessary.

This is not only the view of the British Virgin Islands. It is also the view of UK Parliamentarians who have recently called for the Order to be removed as the Territory Government has already clearly demonstrated its commitment to reform and good governance.

The UK has signaled that it is prepared to do so by May 2024 if the Governor posted on the islands is satisfied with the implementation of reform. We hope the UK will reconsider its position and move swiftly to remove the Order which does not reflect the spirit of a modern partnership.

At the recently concluded Joint Ministerial Council in London between the UK and Overseas Territories, the British Virgin Islands expressed a desire for a new modern partnership with the UK based on mutual respect, mutual responsibility and respect for international law. However, the Order in Council in reserve remains an impediment to normalised relations, despite positive exchanges in recent months.

On the ground, the UK-BVI crisis last year reinforced the view among many politically engaged persons that the British Virgin Islands must become more self-determined. However, there is a clear recognition that greater self-determination requires stronger internal checks and balances in order for good governance to be self-sustaining over the long-term.

There are also very strongly held local views that the next round of constitutional advancement should not be cosmetic in nature, but rather should entail concrete constitutional changes in which the British Virgin Islands moves closer to attaining a full measure of self-government.

In this regard, a Constitutional Review Commission was launched last year to consider next steps in the constitutional advancement of the Territory. Among other things, the Commission is considering a mechanism for the powers reserved to the Governor over the public service, administration of the courts and internal security, to be permanently transfer to the devolved Territory Government. They are also seeking public input on the parameters of greater self-determination. The final round of public consultations is underway and the Commission's final report is expected later this year.

Excellencies, I want to remind everyone concerned that the British Virgin Islands' drive to attain a full measure of self-government should be a partnership between the Territory and its partners.

The UN system has an important role to play in providing international accountability as it concerns the situation of the Non-Self-Governing Territories like the British Virgin Island and also supporting their sustainable development and climate resilience.

CARICOM, OECS and the Association of Caribbean States are also partners of the British Virgin Islands who is an Associate Member of each of these regional organisations. We share with their Member States a common heritage, common historical experience, common climate vulnerability and other common challenges as a Small Island Developing State. The British Virgin Islands future is inextricably linked to our brothers and sisters in the Caribbean.

More broadly, the UN Special Committee on Decolonization that is comprised of Member States from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East and Europe, has a mandate to support the complete decolonization of the British Virgin Islands by the UN deadline of 2030 via one of the UN sanctioned options for self-determination.

The UK itself as the Administering Power bears a historical responsibility to assist the Territory in developing its free political institutions and achieving the highest political aspirations of its people. It should do so in partnership with the Government and people of the British Virgin Islands, which was demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

All partners should be working together collaboratively toward the common goal of a sustainable, self-determined and fully decolonized British Virgin Islands.

Madam Chair, toward this end, the British Virgin Islands requests five basic things:

1. The British Virgin Islands requests a C-24 visiting mission to the Territory in 2023. This is the fourth occasion in which we have made this request. Everyone concerned will benefit from such a mission, especially the people of the Territory.

2. The British Virgin Islands also requests the assistance of the relevant UN departments to assist the Territory Government with a local education campaign on the options for achieving a full measure of self-government.
3. The British Virgin Islands requests that the UN system assist us with resource mobilisation in our efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030. We are grateful for the assistance received thus far from ECLAC, UNDP, UNICEF, World Food Programme and the Resident Coordinator's Office in Barbados, but more support is needed.
4. The British Virgin Islands calls on the UN system to redouble its efforts to implement the annual UN resolutions on the Question of the British Virgin Islands adopted at the UN General Assembly.
5. Finally, the British Virgin Islands requests that the self-governance assessment of the British Virgin Islands completed by Independent Governance Expert Dr. Carlyle Corbin, is explicitly referenced in the draft UN resolution on the Question of the British Virgin Islands. We also ask that the Bureau officially share the self-governance assessment with the members of the C-24 ahead of the committee's substantive session in June.

Madam Chair, excellencies, distinguished delegates, I thank you for your attention and Premier Wheatley looks forward to appearing before the C-24 at its substantive session in New York in June.