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UK-Appointed BVI Governor Requests More Power Amid Reform Delays, Sparks Political Backlash

Governor Rankin seeks expanded authority as crucial reforms stall in BVI

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Janeke Simon **January 11, 2024**

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BVI Governor John Rankin

The sluggish pace of implementation of reforms emanating from the Commission of Inquiry has led BVI Governor John Rankin to ask for additional powers to be granted to the Governor's Office from the United Kingdom.

This request has prompted a furious response from local officials, and the request for an emergency meeting among heads of government of the Caribbean Overseas Territories by BVI Premier Natalio Wheatley.

“Additional time alone will not be enough,” said Governor Rankin, who is due to resign office at the end of January. He noted that more time to implement the COI recommendations was sought by the government – and approved by the UK – twice last year, but “even these extended deadlines are being consistently missed.” Now, he says, there’s no chance that the current May deadline will be met.

Noting that his previous quarterly review was relatively positive, Mr. Rankin said that progress in the last few months has stalled, with only one reform being completed since September – the receipt of the required constitutional review report. That reform, however, “was not carried out by government, but by an independent review body,” the governor said.

Some reforms promised by the premier which remain uncompleted include an amended Register of Interests Act, a new education grants policy, a policy for the operation of statutory boards, a new Public Service Management Act, amendments to how discretionary powers are exercised by ministers, an amended Integrity in Public Life Act, and a functioning Whistleblower Act, among others.

“I am concerned that the things that actually make a difference are not seeing the light of day even though work is being done,” he said.

While underscoring the need for a new deadline to be established, this time until November 2024, Mr. Rankin said that there was “clearly a need for some further step or steps to drive forward implementation of the COI recommendations,” although he emphasized that those steps would not include the triggering of the Order in Council that would impose direct rule on the territory for a period of time.

The governor’s comments, made on January 5 as his Fifth Quarterly Review was published, have united the territory’s politicians in opposition to his decision to request additional powers for the Office of the Governor. Myron Walwyn, at-large member of parliament, said that “the rationale given by the governor for asking for those additional powers...does not meet the threshold,” while also arguing that the governor’s current powers allow him the ability to do what he says needs to be done.

“He mentioned the ability to be able to bring legislation directly to the House of Assembly,” Mr. Walwyn said, “the authority to exercise a certain level of control over departments and ministries to get certain things done, and matters relating to contracts being brought before the Public Accounts Committee. I submit to you that within the current construct of the Virgin Islands Constitution Order 2007, and the usual functioning of government, the governor can achieve each of these three things that he gave above.”

Mr. Wheatley, meanwhile, said that he was “alarmed and deeply offended” by the governor’s request, especially in the face of a recent joint declaration with the UK that emphasized the partnership between the home country and its overseas territories. “The fact that this request has been made without any consultation with the government of the Virgin Islands harkens back to the heyday of colonial governors ruling over these Virgin Islands.”

The BVI premier then requested an emergency meeting of the Caribbean Overseas Territories Caucus to discuss the development, saying that Governor Rankin’s request is “completely unjustified, unnecessary, and squarely aimed at supporting the governor’s own agenda.”

The meeting is scheduled for Thursday, January 11, while Mr. Rankin is set to resign office on January 20, with Daniel Puce scheduled to be sworn in as the new governor of the BVI on January 29.

