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'A Dark Day in the Virgin Islands': Bryan Faces Unprecedented Crisis, Admits Limited Knowledge Amid Federal Probes

Recent federal actions including arrests and significant resignations send shockwaves through the Bryan administration, impacting multiple departments

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Governor Albert Bryan, Jr.

Monday's press conference from Government House provided little new information to the public about the multiple federal probes that were announced over the weekend, which have resulted in arrests and resignations among senior government officials.?

After cautioning viewers that “there’s an absolute limit of what we can share, or what we can discuss with you,” due to the active federal investigations currently ongoing, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. demonstrated very little understanding of the current situation facing his administration beyond what has been reported in the local press.

“I don’t know what it’s about,” said Governor Bryan, in response to a question during Monday's press conference. “I just know that papers have been requested, phones have been requested from these individuals,” he continued, referring to the investigations which have resulted in the mobile phones of Police Commissioner Ray Martinez, Office of Management and Budget Director Jenifer O’Neal, and Sports Parks and Recreation Commissioner Calvert White being seized by federal authorities.

In response to questions from the Consortium about last week’s arrests of Department of Education Maintenance Director Davidson Charlemagne and former VI Housing Finance Authority Chief Operating Officer Darin Richardson, Governor Bryan admitted a similar lack of information. When he discovered the allegations that there appears to have been a \$4 million contract to handle lumber given to VIHFA by the federal government, he admitted to being “kind of perplexed,” since as far as he knew, “they had a MOU with the Department of Education to store it there for free.” Governor Bryan still does not know what the contract under scrutiny entails. “I haven’t seen that contract as yet,” he said. The governor has since requested a copy from the VIHFA board. “I have a meeting this afternoon with Eugene Jones, who is the head of the agency,” Governor Bryan continued. “I only know as much as you know.”

The governor disclosed that as of Monday morning, he had not yet received the resignation of Commissioner Martinez, notwithstanding a comment from Government House on [Sunday afternoon](#) stating that “the Governor has accepted Mr. Martinez’s resignation to ensure the integrity of our law enforcement efforts.” Ms. O’Neal has [tendered her resignation](#) as requested. As for Mr. White, Governor Bryan says he will not be asked to resign “at this time. This is a recent development, so we’re looking into what his exposure may be.”?

The investigation into Commissioner Martinez, and what seems to be a separate probe into the dealings of Commissioner White, are centered on contracts and bids involving St. Thomas-based company Mon Ethos Pro Support. The company is said to have provided Mr. Martinez with money to work on a personal project after receiving a contract from the V.I. Police Department. Separately, a \$1.8 million bid was awarded to Mon Ethos Pro Support to install cameras on facilities owned by the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation. Although no contract was executed between DPSR and Mon Ethos, federal authorities are looking into potential interactions between Commissioner White and Mon Ethos principals.

Despite these developments, as well as the previous criminal convictions of Mon Ethos founder David Whitaker, Governor Bryan was loath to admit that government agencies may have erred in making the decision to do business with the firm. Instead, he pointed to Commissioner Martinez’s assertion that the work Mon Ethos has done with the VIPD has made significant contributions to the marked reduction in crime. “We have been having excellent results in terms of our crime,” Governor Bryan said. “The police commissioner credits a lot of the arrests that we have made and the progress we’ve been making in crime to Mon Ethos,” he continued, referring to the man whose resignation he just requested. Nevertheless, Governor Bryan says that he is already in the process of reviewing all current government contracts to which Mon Ethos is a party.?

With the annual budget cycle already in progress, Governor Bryan called Ms. O’Neal’s abrupt departure “a big blow to us.” However, he expressed confidence in Finance Commissioner Kevin

McCurdy to keep things moving smoothly, as he was “integrally involved in the making of the budget and is also the former assistant of Director O’Neal.”

Calling it “a real dark day” for the Virgin Islands following a “brutal week and a half,” Governor Bryan said that as his administration grapples with the waves that have recently rocked it, he would be prioritizing ongoing efforts towards greater transparency, accountability, and ethical practice in government. “This past Monday, the Division of Personnel began the development of ethics and conflict of interest training program. This is something we had been working on a while,” Governor Bryan noted. Led by Personnel Director Cindy Richardson, the intention is to ensure that all government agencies have access to the training.?

Draft legislation on ethics among public officials is also getting a second look, the governor said. “I also took some time this weekend to review the ethics bill that Senator [Kenneth] Gittens has before the Legislature,” he said. “We had a document that we had done a number of years ago that we plan on sitting with Senator Gittens to add some real teeth and some clarity around some of the things he has in there.”?

Governor Bryan has also pledged additional support to the Office of the Inspector General. After asking Inspector General Dahlia Thomas to take a closer look at maintenance contracts at the Department of Education in the aftermath of Mr. Charlemagne’s arrest, Governor Bryan said that he was informed that her office was “really inundated.” The Office of the Governor, Mr. Bryan promised, “would look to see how we could get” additional resources to the OIG, should Ms. Thomas need them. A further million dollars had been pledged to fight white collar crime in unspecified ways, Governor Bryan said, noting that some of those funds would go to “support Gordon Rhea in doing the things he needed to make sure that we’re constantly checking on people.”

For the Attorney General’s part, Mr. Rhea began by cautioning the public that between Mr. Martinez, Ms. O’Neal, and Mr. White, “they have not been charged with anything. They have not been indicted.” Nevertheless, he pledged to federal law enforcement officials that the V.I. Department of Justice “is ready to join them in the investigation, to help them in any manner that they think would be appropriate.” He also promised to launch separate investigations as well, both parallel to ongoing federal probes, as well as “investigations into some other departments just to make sure everything is running smoothly.” Mr. Rhea also vowed to “sit down with department heads and some of the other attorneys in the Department of Justice so that we can take a look at the procedures that are in place to prevent these types of things from happening.”

Together, Governor Bryan and Mr. Rhea presented themselves to the public as intolerant of corruption in the public sector, and staunch defenders of integrity in public life. However, with public confidence and trust in government badly shaken by recent developments, it is clear that Virgin Islanders must see action from territorial leadership as robust as their rhetoric.