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Hours Before Closing Borders to Blunt the Coronavirus, BVI Government Airlifts Students Home From Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados

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Angela Burns **March 23, 2020**

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Tortola, British Virgin Islands – Quick action by BVI Minister of Education Dr. Natalio Wheatley saw the evacuation of four students studying in Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados back home to the British Virgin Islands on Sunday night after the Terrence B. Lettsome International Airport was already closed to scheduled traffic.

The move was initiated by Kimberly Hatchett, who is undertaking the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants ACCA at the Students Accountancy Centre in Trinidad and Tobago. She made contact with persons who were able to contact the Education Minister to make the flight arrangements.

BVI Premier Andrew Fahie had announced just a few hours earlier the sudden closure of the territory's air and sea ports to all travelers effective Sunday March 22 at 11:59pm, in an effort to keep the islands free from the dreaded coronavirus, the virulent pathogen causing the COVID-19 disease, which continues to spread in pandemic proportions throughout the world.

The BVI does not have any cases of the COVID-19.

"I am back because of the coronavirus outbreak. The situation in Trinidad is very bad and I know it's going to get worse. So my initial response was to get out as soon as I can before it gets even worse because I don't want to be trapped in a foreign place where they imposed a lockdown and it could be a possibility that I would not be able to get out anytime soon," Ms. Hatchett said.

As with the other students, she already had her ticket booked to leave in a few days, since school was closed. Having gotten a flight out of Trinidad and Tobago, she would have had to overnight in Barbados on Sunday, but then she found out that the BVI's borders were also closing.

"We are so grateful to Dr. Wheatley for getting us home," Ms. Hatchett said.

Sadé Piper is a 2nd-year law student at the Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies. She was able to make direct contact with the minister of Education, who asked her to coordinate with the other students and immediately get to the Grantley Adams International Airport. A charter flight was arranged with Executive Air Ltd. out of Barbados.

"Over the past week, Barbados moved from 3 to about 14 cases and from a stage one to stage two situation, so I think everybody is a bit panicked right now," Ms. Piper said. "I jumped into action and messaged my Minister of Education and spoke to him about the situation where three of us were scheduled to come in on Tuesday. It was a bit of a shocker for us realizing that the airport would have been closed on Sunday."

She said Dr. Wheatley got their passport information and booked them on the charter flight which left Barbados at 7:45pm.

"So thank you Dr. Wheatley for allowing us to get home, I am glad to be home," Ms. Piper said.

Lecredia Whattley is also a law student at UWI Cave Hill, wrapping up her final semester at the faculty of law.

She was overcome with excitement. "It's good to be home. I didn't think I would make it here today. I want to thank God firstly and Sadé, Sadé is the real deal and whoever helped us."

Tamika Calme is also in her final year studying law at the Barbados based Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies.

"First of all, it (the experience) was terrifying," she said. "At the beginning, no one really took it seriously but by the first week we had 14 cases and that was devastating. At the end of the day, we're not Barbadians, our parents live here and so in a time like this, I feel like it was necessary to be with your family so that if anything happens at least you're in the comfort of your own home."

She also expressed gratitude to Dr. Wheatley because, "listen, I wanted to cry when earlier today I'm getting a message that the borders are about to be closed so I would not have been able to come home."

Ms. Calme said at the last minute, through contact made by Ms. Piper to Dr. Wheatley, they rushed to the airport and made it home.

The flight from Barbados took two hours.

All of the students went through health checks at the airport and had to sign an agreement to go into self isolation or quarantine for the next 14 days.

It is unclear how many other BVI students who might have wanted to come home but are stranded overseas.

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