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# A Transfer Day, Quiet, Almost Forgettable in the Face of Coronavirus

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**Transfer Day 2017 commemoration** By. KAREEM ALEXANDER FOR VI CONSORTIUM

Today marks 103 years since Denmark sold the then-Danish West Indies to The United States of America on March 31, 1917, for \$25 million in gold bullion. The sale saw one powerful nation handing rule of a people to another powerful nation.

The day is usually marked by commemoration, including parades and speeches by local and U.S. leaders. Sometimes, like during the 2017 Centennial event, Danish representatives attend.

But this year, with the coronavirus devastating the world and forcing governments to take stringent measures to stop the disease from spreading, all Transfer Day activities have been called off. In fact, in the face of the virulent virus, Transfer Day itself was all but forgotten, as local

leaders find themselves consumed with waging an all-encompassing battle against the disease.

The virus has so far infected 801,400 and killed 38,743. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, there were 30 confirmed cases as of Monday, with 24 more pending. And the numbers are expected to increase, according to the Dept. of Health, as it ramps up testing in the coming weeks. D.O.H. says it expects there to be over 100 people hospitalized during the course of the disease's run in the USVI, a number Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said the territory can manage.

One of the most significant Transfer Day events was in 2017, when the territory commemorated the centennial event, or 100 years of U.S. rule. then-Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen visited the USVI and provided remarks. The Denmark leader delivered a speech that fully accepted responsibility for actions of his ancestors, making no excuses for the horrors so many faced. He also announced a five-year scholarship program to benefit the territory's college students.

In announcing the scholarship program, Mr. Rasmussen said about the territory's youth, "Ladies and gentlemen, this time around we will not hold them back, we will push them forward."

The prime minister was sure during his address to highlight the bravery of legends like Moses "Buddhoe" Gottlieb, known as General Budhoe, the free black man who led the 1848 slave rebellion on St. Croix.

After acknowledging the 100th milestone of U.S. rule of the USVI, Mr. Rasmussen went straight to the core of his speech.

"The preceding years have not been forgotten — neither in Denmark, nor in the Virgin Islands," he said. The prime minister mentioned the town names such as Christiansted and Frederiksted, as well as the design of the town buildings, stating that they served as reminders of how close the USVI and Denmark were nit. He also acknowledged the thousands of Danes who visit the territory annually, and said both he and the people of Denmark feel a special bond with Virgin Islanders.

"But although we share a common past, we have not always shared the same story about that past," he said. The prime minister said when he was a child, there was a popular Danish story about the Danish West Indies that spoke of the USVI as an exotic location with peaceful coexisting. He also mentioned a famous Danish King who had abolished slavery, but said Danish slavery of the USVI continued after it had been abolished, and living conditions only improved on paper.

"The true heroes were the men and women who stood up to the injustice," Mr. Rasmussen said, later adding, "I suggest we also look somewhere else in our hearts and minds. I suggest we ask ourselves is there any justification for suppression? Any argument for treating people brutally? And we all know the answer; the answer is no. There's no justification whatsoever for the exploitation of men, women and children that took place in these islands under Danish flags. There's no justification for slavery. It is unforgivable. And it is a dark and disgraceful part of Danish history. So when I search my heart and my mind, there's no doubt that the true heroes of the past are the men and women of the Virgin Islands who defied suppression. They were not given their freedom, they took it back."

Mr. Rasmussen became emotional almost to the point of tears at various points of his address. He continued to praise the pioneers of the uprisings that ultimate led to freedom, including Queen Mary Thomas, Queen Mathilda Macbean and Axeline "Queen Agnes" Salomon, who led a

movement that ended with the famous Fireburn.

“We must acknowledge what had happen in the past, and we must acknowledge that what happened in the past has affected where the island is today, because we can’t undo the past, what we can do is to improve the future,” Mr. Rasmussen said.

The prime minister said with Denmark now acknowledging the atrocities of the past, and with both sides deciding to embrace the future, “Today the people of Denmark and the people of the Virgin Islands share a common historic path, and today we share the same view of history, and today we share the same heroes. And hopefully we shall also share a bright future.”

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