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Nearly 700 Persons Lose Jobs in BVI as a Result of Coronavirus; British Territory's Population Was Roughly 28,000 as of 2010

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TORTOLA, BVI — BVI Minister of Natural Resources, Labor and Immigration Vincent Wheatley on Sunday revealed that some 683 persons had lost their jobs as a result of the government's mandatory one-month 24 hour lockdown of the territory in the wake of COVID-19.

However, he was quick to state that the BVI government, unlike some other jurisdictions, would not ask work permit holders to leave, rather, he said, the government would be making every reasonable effort to accommodate them.

The BVI is home to over 100 nationalities. The 2010 Population Census put the total number of persons living here as 28,054, 61 percent of whom were born outside of the territory.

With the territory on lockdown, workers, mainly in the hospitality, marine and construction industries, were laid off or would have had their employment terminated. These persons are advised to contact the Departments of Immigration and Labor and Workforce Development to report on their status, register any disputes or request changes to their labour and immigration agreements.

Government recently announced the phased reopening of the territory, which started April 27 with a soft curfew from 1pm to 6am and the gradual reopening of businesses, which have to be inspected and approved.

But this was not before 77 businesses contacted the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 33 reporting closures, with 683 persons being laid off and 72 terminated. Businesses are advised to continue reporting to the department on their operational status in order to assist with the government's ongoing COVID-19 assessment.

"Of the approximate 1300 employees reported to have been affected, 425 are BVI Islanders or Belongers, 493 are work permit holders, 80 are work permit exempt and over 330 of those persons are still being classified," Minister Wheatley said in his statement.

He reminded employers that during the lay off period, employee bonds with the Immigration Department will remain active and as such bonded workers continue to be their responsibility.

The Labor Code 2010 speaks to the entitlement of severance pay for employees laid off for more than three months without a date for reemployment, if they are terminated.

"In times of disaster and in this case a global pandemic, there should be legislation to address the specific national situation, which we realize is lacking at this time," the government minister said.

He said government recognizes the great burden on employees and as such is considering an amendment to the Labor Code 2010 to address an increase in the lay off period.

In terms of lodging complaints, employees are advised to contact labour@gov.vg to make an appointment for a teleconference meeting.

"I would like to take this time to comfort work permit holders who are currently categorized as inactive due to an expired entry permit," Minister Wheatley said, adding that the Immigration Department and the Department of Labor and Workforce Development will not penalize anyone whose work permit expired during the mandatory lockdown period.

Businesses and employees are informed that employees whose immigration time expired immediately prior to or during the 24 hour curfew, need not seek an extension prior to submitting their work permit renewals.

Persons who have been laid off should visit the Immigration Department to arrange for the necessary extensions to make sure they are legally residing in the territory.

In addition, government has suspended the acceptance and issuance of new, temporary and periodic work permit applications until 31 July 2020 in the first instance, but will continue to accept and process change of employer and change of position work permits for persons already residing here.

There will be no issuance of joint clearances for persons with approved work permits.

Persons who may have received clearances prior to the restrictions of travel and full lockdown of the territory can contact the Immigration and Labor and Workforce Development Departments, who can now issue a maximum of two re-issuances of work permit clearances to any person with a valid clearance who was unable to travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that employees will have up to nine months before their work permits become invalid.

Persons residing in the BVI who have been terminated and would like to seek alternative employment can now apply to the acting Chief Immigration Officer to receive a conditional permit, subject to certain conditions.

“I am cognizant of the fact that this may require some non BVI employees to leave the territory if no viable job opportunities are readily available to them,” the Labor minister acknowledged. “I however want to state that while we know that other jurisdictions are already asking persons on work permits and not currently working to leave during this time, the BVI government is not requesting anyone to leave at this time. We will continue for as long as we can to assist you...during this unprecedented and unpredictable time.”

He said his team is also working to assist workers who may want to return to the BVI to reestablish their healthy contribution to the territory.

The borders of the BVI remain closed until 1 June 2020 at which time a phased opening will be initiated to only receive BVI Islanders, Belongers and persons holding certificates of residency for the BVI. No mention was made of persons who might need to leave the territory for other reasons.

The closure of air and sea ports in the BVI restricted the outward travel of visitors who were here at the time the lockdown was instituted. By now, their landing permits would have expired.

However, they have been reassured by Mr. Wheatley that they will not be penalized and should now contact the Immigration Department to have this status regularized. The department will prioritize this during the week of May 4 and such visitors will receive a call or if not, they should email immigrationinfo@gov.vg to secure an appointment.

Persons with matters needing the urgent attention of the Immigration Department must call these numbers, as walk-ins will not be accepted and social distancing must be adhered to during appointments during office hours of 8am to 12:30pm: 468 4703, 468 4705, 468 4752 or 468 9639 on Tortola and for Virgin Gorda - 468 6520, 468 6521 and 468 6606.

To make appointments with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, also from 8am to 12:30pm, persons on Tortola should call 468 4708, 468 4707 and for Virgin Gorda 458 6525.

The Minister of Natural Resources and Labor, in his statement on Sunday, also announced that work continues on the development of a border management and e-visa system for the Immigration Department and Civil Registry and Passport Office, to better track the movement of persons throughout BVI borders and to digitize the visa issuing system.

On December 2, 2019, the government of the BVI signed a contract with Canada Bank Note (CBN) for the development of this system, which should have been completed by May 8th. However, because of delays due to the coronavirus, the deadline was adjusted to immediately following the lifting of travel restrictions.

In addition, the House of Assembly is looking to approve a suite of legislation to allow for online document collections and payment transactions relating to work permits.

“As minister, I am keen on having this system put into place as it will aid greatly in the advancement of work permit processing,” Mr. Wheatley said, adding that this should be launched before the end of this quarter.

Again, the media was not invited to ask questions during this live Facebook government update.

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