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BVI Proposes Unity Government to Discourage UK Takeover; House Speaker Vacates Position; Premier Fahie Remains in Federal Jail for Now

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BVI Premier Andrew Fahie

Developments in the BVI have been occurring at breakneck speed, ever since last week's arrest of Premier Andrew Fahie prompted Governor John Rankin to release the report of the Commission of Inquiry a month early.

Since then, calls for Fahie's resignation have come from his own VIP colleagues as well as from the Leader of the Opposition, while Deputy Premier Dr. Natalio Wheatley announced that he had replaced Fahie as Chair of the Virgin Islands Party.

Now, we learn that Speaker of the House of Assembly Julian Willock has vacated his position. At the beginning of a House of Assembly sitting on Tuesday, Willock addressed his colleagues, stating that he had received a call from Wheatley who said a majority of assembly members who agreed that Willock should leave his position. Willock said he asked Wheatley whether they had any evidence that he was implicated in any way, to which Wheatley responded no. Willock stated that he asked that he be given until Wednesday to collect his belongings before vacating the position. Willock also said he would be speaking with his attorney regarding the matter.

Willock then left the sitting and was replaced as presiding officer by Deputy Speaker Neville Smith, but not before promising that Parliament - and the public - would hear more from him on this matter.

Local publication BVI Beacon reports that Willock spoke to journalists outside the sitting, telling them that he was quote “a sacrificial lamb,” but failed to disclose the reason for Wheatley asking him to resign, although Willock says he knows why. He promised a press conference where quote “everything will be revealed,” and said it was likely to happen before the week is over.

Following that shock announcement, Deputy Premier Wheatley took to the floor. He began by publicly denouncing, for the first time, the alleged actions of his premier while reminding the public that Fahie was entitled to due process before the law. Wheatley then addressed the looming possibility that the United Kingdom will ultimately decide to suspend the autonomy of the BVI when it comes to representative government. To avoid that outcome, Wheatley said Virgin Islanders needed to come to terms with some inconvenient truths.

During the address, Wheatley said all political parties should put aside their differences and form a national unity government for the greater good of the BVI. As part of this new unity party, recommendations include Opposition Leader Marlon Penn being given the Health and Social Development Portfolio and his party colleague Mitch Turnbull being offered the Ministry of Labour and Natural Resources.

Whether the governor and mainland authorities accept the proposal remains to be seen, as Commissioner Sir Gary Hickinbottom concluded and wrote in his report that current and previous administrations have not only ignored tenets of good governance but actively encouraged the continuing dysfunction in the BVI public sector.

Meanwhile, in Miami, Premier Andrew Fahie remains in a federal lockup, as defense and prosecuting attorneys argued over whether he could claim diplomatic immunity and whether he should be offered bail as he awaits the start of his trial on drug and money laundering charges.

While the defense counsel argued that Fahie, as the Premier of the BVI, did enjoy diplomatic immunity and therefore should be unconditionally released, a response by the US Attorney's Office asserted that the British Virgin Islands was in fact not recognized by the Government of the United States as a sovereign state and thus Fahie did not have any kind of immunity from prosecution. In a bizarre turn of events, a document filed with the court in Miami, purportedly from the Office of the Premier, supported Fahie's claim by stating that it was the official position of the government of the Virgin Islands that the Premier, by virtue of his high office, did in fact enjoy immunity. The letter went on to request the premier's immediate and unconditional release, echoing the language of his attorney's Monday filing. The communique, dated May 3rd and bearing the stamp of the International Affairs Secretariat, was disavowed the very next day by Acting Premier Wheatley, who said the document was the work of a rogue public officer. Wheatley, who said he was in the House of Assembly meeting at the time the letter was issued,

said that neither he nor Permanent Secretary for the Office of the Premier Dr. Carolyn O'Neal Morton, was aware of the missive.

The assertions in the document did not in fact reflect the official position of the BVI government, Wheatley said, and vowed that the public officer responsible would be investigated and dealt with immediately.

This development came as Fahie faced the court for his pre-trial hearing, in which opposing attorneys argued for and against his release on bond. In what came as a surprise to several court observers, Magistrate Judge Alicia Otazo-Reyes sided with the defense and said that the Premier could be released on a \$500,000 bond, on condition that he surrender his travel documents and be subject to electronic monitoring. That decision, however, was put on hold pending an appeal from federal prosecutors. What that means is that for now, the Premier of the British Virgin Islands remains in a U.S. Federal detention facility as he awaits the next determination of his fate.

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