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UK Decides Against Imposing Direct Rule on British Virgin Islands, Gives Local Government Two Years to Implement Changes

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Tortola, BVI.

The United Kingdom has decided against imposing direct rule on the British Virgin Islands for now, giving the territory two years to implement changes while warning that failure to do so would result in swift action.

A 946-page [Commission of Inquiry report](#) led by Commissioner Gary Hickinbottom and submitted in April by BVI Governor John Rankin, concluded that among other actions, the BVI should lose autonomy and its government dissolved for two years because of gross failures of governance.

The report highlighted failures of many members of parliament to register their interests as required by law, irregularities in the distribution of grants by parliamentarians and by central government, which suggest that corruption, dishonesty, and abuse of office may have taken place. Other government contracts were also scrutinized, several involving the former Premier Andrew Fahie. One example offered by Rankin was a series of contracts amounting to almost one million dollars awarded to a former special advisor to Fahie.

However instead of direct rule, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said Britain would give the local government an opportunity to implement reforms in the next two years. If the BVI fails to implement required changes, the UK foreign office has taken new powers to make taking over the territory and imposing direct governance easier.

Though the Commission of Inquiry report was not tied to the case involving Fahie, [the former premier's arrest in April](#) by U.S. federal officials on charges related to conspiracy to import a controlled substance and money laundering strengthened the report's findings and its recommendations.

The report identified corruption in the police service, as well as serious concerns about the operations of the customs department. The report concluded that “particularly in customs, there is an environment conducive to corruption.”

When it comes to governance, the governor said the executive branch was found wanting in that area as well. Reading an excerpt from the report, Rankin quoted Hickinbottom: “Governance in areas under the control of government ministers is at best very poor, with principles such as openness and transparency not simply absent but positively shunned. Proper procedures, checks and balances are absent, or patently inadequate, or ignored, or bypassed. The evidence in this regard is overwhelming, and extends to almost all areas of government.”

Even so, Ms. Truss said the BVI government should be given an opportunity to "demonstrate their commitment to reform" and implement the 48 recommendations made by Mr. Hickinbottom along with other measures the administration has proposed.

"If it becomes clear that this approach is not delivering the reform the people of the BVI want and deserve we will take action," Ms. Truss said. "This may require the swift implementation of the final report recommendation [imposing direct rule]."