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In Fear of Being Arrested, BVI Public Servants Are Refusing to Do Their Jobs, Deputy Premier Says

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Janeke Simon **October 30, 2022**

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BVI Deputy Premier Kye Rymer. By. PICTURE CREDIT: BVI NEWS

Now that two senior public servants have been arrested and charged, other employees in the public sector of the British Virgin Islands are afraid to do their jobs.

That's the claim from Deputy Premier Kye Rymer, who spoke on the issue during a meeting of the territory's House of Assembly on Tuesday.

"Madam Speaker there is now this trepidation within the government and it's very difficult right now, as even ministers, to get anything achieved, based on what is happening with public officers who are doing their jobs," Rymer said.

On October 10th, former director of the International Affairs Secretariat Najan Christopher, was arrested and charged with breach of trust and false assumption of authority approximately five months after she reportedly sent a diplomatic note requesting the release of disgraced former Premier Andrew Fahie due to his alleged diplomatic immunity from prosecution.

Fahie's defense counsel presented the letter, dated May 3 and bearing the official stamp of the BVI's International Affairs Secretariat, to the court as part of the argument why the former premier should be immediately released from custody. However, prosecutors dismissed the note as having no authority, as any such claim would have to be asserted by the United Kingdom, the BVI's colonial power.

At the time, then acting Premier Dr. Natalio Wheatley disavowed the note completely.

Following news of Christopher's arrest came confirmation that the Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Education Lorna Stevens had also been arrested and charged with Breach of Trust by a Public Officer.

It is not immediately clear why Stevens was arrested, but local publication BVI News reports that she was one called before the Commission of Inquiry last year to give evidence regarding the construction of a perimeter wall around the Elmore Stoutt High School, a project that experienced massive cost overruns and was the subject of an investigation, begun in 2019. That probe has already resulted in the arrest of one person - local businessman Kelvin Thomas, who was hit with several fraud charges as a result.

Both Stevens and Christopher have since been bailed as they await their respective trials.

Despite the premier's repudiation of the issuance of the letter by Christopher, she has received support from some members of society. BVI News reports talk show host Julio Henry calling the charges against her hypocrisy, asserting that Christopher was just doing her job in writing the letter. Henry contrasted Christopher's current legal jeopardy with Police Commissioner Mark Collins, who faced no sanctions for a widely panned recruitment video which painted the BVI as a crime haven riddled with gun violence.

Claude Skelton Cline, another radio personality, reportedly suggested that Christopher consider standing for elected office, hours after she was charged with violating the public's trust.

As the territory grapples with the issues of entrenched corruption and challenges to good governance that have resulted in a recommendation to partially suspend the constitution to impose direct rule by the UK, the deputy premier is arguing that the arrest of public sector workers should be looked at carefully.

"There should be a standard across the board," Rymer said. "You have public officers now saying, 'I ain't doing this because I'm not going to get locked up...' But Madam Speaker we have a country to run. But I could understand what they're going through because I was public officer as well."