

BVI Premier Says London Trip Successful, Denies Sleeping on Airport Floor

Caribbean / **Published On January 24, 2023 07:11 AM /**

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BVI Premier Dr. Natalio Wheatley.

Even as British Virgin Islands Premier Dr. Natalio Wheatley reported a "successful" trip to London, the threat of direct rule hanging over the territory remains.

At a press conference on Monday, Dr. Wheatley noted a number of "fruitful" engagements, including a courtesy call to Overseas Territories Minister Lord Goldsmith, to address issues of concern in the BVI, including financial, political and environmental interests. The premier called the discussions with Lord Goldsmith "warm and frank."

"I very much appreciated his great interest in the sustainable development of the BVI. He was very keen on tapping UK support to assist the BVI's efforts to both conserve, and sustainably use

the marine environment,” Mr. Wheatley stated.

He added that Lord Goldsmith gave his commitment to providing UK technical assistance to continue the work of reform.

The elephant in the room was also addressed, the premier said. “I did raise the concern about the Order in Council, currently being held in reserve. The minister agreed that we would have a dedicated discussion on this in the very near future. While that issue needs to be resolved, I felt Lord Goldsmith was genuine about wanting a stronger partnership between the UK and BVI, that fairly considers the interests on both sides,” Mr. Wheatley told local journalists.

When questioned whether any progress had been made thus far toward having the Order withdrawn, Mr. Wheatley told the media “for the Order in Council to be removed, that would certainly have to happen as a result of intervention by the Foreign Secretary who, of course, the Overseas Territories Minister reports to.”

“Certainly, we’ve had a very good discussion with the Overseas Territories Minister,” he continued, “Our discussions have not yet concluded so certainly when he comes next week we intend to engage on that particular matter.”

Goldsmith is expected to travel to the BVI next week.

The premier hopes to continue discussions surrounding the thorny issue of the territory’s potential loss of autonomy during their upcoming engagements, promising to give “every reason” to have the order of council removed.

Another noteworthy takeaway from Dr. Wheatley's trip, he says, was a discussion about medicinal cannabis between the BVI delegation and representatives from the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development office, and the UK Home Office.

The discussion, according to the premier, focused on licensing medical practitioners in the territory to administer medicinal cannabis to patients. “We have found a way forward on this aspect of medicinal cannabis, and we are proceeding to put the necessary regimes in place for approvals,” Mr. Wheatley noted.

The premier also met with UK parliamentarians who he said expressed keen interest in the BVI. “I got very good insight and advice on issues of interest to us, and I believe we are making progress in improving the views of the [British] Virgin Islands in that political institution.”

UK Shadow Overseas Territories Minister Stephen Doughty received a greater understanding of the economic, political and environmental priorities of the Virgin Islands. Mr. Wheatley also expressed satisfaction following a bilateral meeting with the speaker of the House of Commons, Lindsay Hoyle.

“The speaker's a champion of the Virgin Islands and Overseas Territories and was very gracious with his time. We had an excellent discussion on how the register of interest works in the UK parliament. He also provided other very helpful insights that were discussed with my colleagues in the House of Assembly on the economic front,” the premier continued.

Mr. Wheatley said productive roundtable discussions were held with the financial services industry in the UK, adding that the industry was “well represented” by firms operating out of the British Virgin Islands.

“We were able to update them on legislative developments and plans for the year ahead. The feedback was very good and together we are committed to ensuring the jurisdiction remains competitive,” he explained.

The business meetings continued with the Caribbean Council to gauge interest in potential investment in BVI's tourism sector, particularly a proposed airport expansion. Mr. Wheatley promised to follow up with business partners keen on bolstering the BVI economy.

The premier's agenda during the week-long trip also included the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the University of Southampton. "This is an excellent partnership that will assist the Virgin Islands in researching and documenting our environment, and finding solutions to problems such as climate change," he informed journalists, adding that the blue economy will also be a major focus.

He further informed of a meeting with the National Oceanographic Center where he was presented with progress made on mapping the marine environment of the British Virgin Islands. “We will soon better know what these assets are and how they can be leveraged to help address the climate problem, particularly using carbon markets that will be beneficial to us in the [British] Virgin Islands,” the premier stated.

During Monday's press conference, the premier rubbished claims by one local media outlet that his trip began with a night on the floor of the V.C. Bird International Airport in Antigua, while in transit to London.

Mr. Wheatley admitted that travel delays led to a longer-than-expected layover, and that available accommodation was scarce. “We were advised to wait in the airport until the hotel became available, and when the hotel became available we went to the hotel, and then we were able to engage the BVI’s London office through a virtual call. Later in that day we were able to catch a plane and go to the United Kingdom,” the premier recounted. “Let me just say unequivocally and without a shadow of a doubt, I did not sleep on the floor of the airport and I think it’s again reckless, it’s inaccurate and it’s misleading,” he said.