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Threat of Direct British Rule Over BVI to be Lifted Only If Reforms are Implemented, Says U.K. Minister for Overseas Territories

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Roadtown, Tortola in the BVI By. GETTY IMAGES

Not-so-deeply buried in the pleasant diplomatic language employed by Lord Zac Goldsmith, UK Minister for Overseas Territories, during his three-day visit to the British Virgin Islands, was a clear message: the Order in Council threatening to impose direct rule on the territory will remain until sweeping, systemic governance reforms are completed.

On the last day of his visit, Mr. Goldsmith offered a summary of the trip, saying he was pleased to have been able to have toured not just Tortola but Anegada as well. "I'm honored to be the first UK Minister to visit Anegada in a very long time. I may even be the first ever," he said.

He pointed out three of the most crucial takeaways from his series of meetings and discussions. Perhaps most important to British Virgin Islanders is the question of how much longer the territory must continue to endure the threat to self-governance posed by the Order in Council which remains in abeyance.

“The strength of the commitment I've heard from the premier and his cabinet to promoting good governance and carrying out the reforms inline with the Commission of Inquiry, now I know of course that some of that won't be easy and that there is still much to do,” he said.

“The premier made very clear his strengths of feeling about the Order in Council and we too want to see those reforms through, such that the Order can be lifted.”

Mr. Goldsmith committed to supporting the BVI through the next few months and, following general elections slated for May, to helping make the reforms reality. This, the Overseas Territories Minister said, would bring the “Premier's vision of the BVI as a beacon of democracy” to fruition.

A "stronger, modern" partnership was being built between the United Kingdom and its Caribbean territory, Lord Goldsmith said. "That applies not only to the UK's commitment to ensuring the safety and security of this beautiful territory, it also applies in other areas like health, education, energy reform,” he explained.

“There's room for much stronger and better partnership, sharing best practices, technical expertise, encouraging investment into this territory,” he continued, before announcing that the UK has funded four new inflatable police boats to boost the responsiveness of the Royal Virgin Islands Police.

In addition to the British Overseas Territories, Mr. Goldsmith's portfolio includes Climate and Environment, and therefore while in the BVI, he took the opportunity to learn about key environmental work taking place around the islands.

Mr. Goldsmith, accompanied by a delegation of officials including Governor John Rankin, embarked on an environmental tour which began at the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College (HLSCC) Centre for Applied Marine Studies.

While there, the delegation was briefed on the Centre's mangrove nursery and informed of the territory's challenges in its efforts of restoration, and to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Goldsmith recognized the efforts as crucial, especially given the gravity of climate change's effects across the region. “I'm excited by the energy, the enthusiasm and the commitment I've seen here from so many people to that goal,” he said.

The delegation also examined opportunities for HLSCC graduates and students in the UK, before heading to the J.R. O'Neal Botanical Gardens for a historical tour.

Mr. Goldsmith complimented his hosts' "amazing hospitality" and expressed his satisfaction with the visit.

“I have so enjoyed being here in the British Virgin Islands – meeting elected representatives, officials and community members from right across the territory. The beauty of these islands and the natural riches you have here are nothing short of amazing.”

