

The Virgin Islands Consortium

BVI Premier Calls Governor's Comments about Post-COI Option for Early Elections 'Untrue'

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Double exposure of flag and Westminster Palace with Big Ben clock in the UK. By. GETTY IMAGES

The premier of the British Virgin Islands has bluntly rebutted Governor John Rankin's account of the options before the government after the report of the Commission of Inquiry was released in April 2022.

Last week, Governor Ranking told the media that forming a coalition Government of Unity in the BVI was not the only choice once the United Kingdom Government released the report. "It would've been possible for a dissolution to the House of Assembly to be sought

and I would have had to exercise my responsibilities under the Constitution. But the members of the House of Assembly chose to form a Government of National Unity and committed to the implementation of the COI recommendations, and so that's the process in which we're now proceeding," the governor said.

However, at a press event on Monday, Premier Dr. Natalio Wheatley said that he was "disappointed by Governor Rankin's untrue statement."

"The Governor knows full well, as he himself has previously said, that the UK Government had to be persuaded not to impose direct rule in the period following his early public release of the Commission of Inquiry (COI) Report on 30th April 2022," Mr. Wheatley continued.

According to the premier, in May 2022 former United Kingdom Overseas Territory Minister Amanda Milling "who traveled to the Virgin Islands for crisis talks, made it abundantly clear before she left the territory that she needed an initial commitment by the Government to implement the COI Report recommendations, except A1, because there was very little time to make a case to UK Ministers not to immediately suspend the constitution."

Mr. Wheatley said it is critical the public knows that during Minister Milling's visit, from first day to the departure day of her advisors at the week's end, discussions between the VI government and the UK were to persuade the UK against immediately suspending the constitution.

"The Government of National Unity was sworn in on 5th May and these discussions continued thereafter. In fact, we were asked to submit a proposal on implementation of the COI Report Recommendations under continued democratic governance by 6th May, which posed a big challenge for us due to time constraints," the premier continued.

"We were reminded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that there was precious little time to make the case to then Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and UK Ministers to not impose direct rule on the Territory and that an initial proposal by the Government of the Virgin Islands was urgently needed," he stated.

Premier Wheatley said a first proposal was submitted on May 8, but it was not accepted due to concerns by the FCDO that it would not be strong enough to convince the UK Ministers not to proceed with immediate suspension.

A few days later a revised version of the initial proposal was submitted, however there were still no guarantees forthcoming against the immediate suspension of the constitution.

"Nevertheless, we continued to engage with the UK Government on refining the proposal to try to find a way forward. In fact, in developing the Framework for Implementation of the COI Report Recommendations and Other Reforms, the UK insisted on including a provision on no early elections. In the final framework document agreed between the [British] Virgin Islands and UK, you can find this provision on page 3 under the section on Cabinet. This is also another reason I am disappointed by the governor's statement that

there was an option to go to the polls during the crisis,” said the premier.

For good measure, Mr. Wheatley said he instructed the Government Information Services to publicize a letter addressed to him from Minister Milling which speaks to the issue of suspension of the constitution.

“For the avoidance of doubt, I have instructed the Government Information Service (GIS) to publish the letter in its entirety, alongside this statement, so that the public can clearly see that there was no option to go to the polls as Governor Rankin stated last week. In fact, it was the UK who insisted that we agree to no early elections, which as I mentioned is a commitment in the framework document. It was the Government of National Unity and our proposal that convinced the UK Government not to immediately suspend the constitution as stated in the letter.”

The premier expressed gratitude to members of the Government of National Unity for banding together to “save democracy” within the territory.

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Last week, Governor Ranking told the media that forming a coalition Government of Unity in the BVI was not the only choice once the United Kingdom Government released the report. “It would’ve been possible for a dissolution to the House of Assembly to be sought and I would have had to exercise my responsibilities under the Constitution. But the members of the House of Assembly chose to form a Government of National Unity and committed to the implementation of the COI recommendations, and so that’s the process in which we’re now proceeding,” the governor said.

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