

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Another BVI Scandal: New Audit Finds Gov't Wasted Funds on Pastor, Shipping Company

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Pastor and radio personality Claude Skelton Cline By. BVI NEWS

Two audits recommended by the Commission of Inquiry in the British Virgin Islands have been forwarded to prosecutors and police for review, said BVI Governor John Rankin.

The territory's auditor general recently completed probes into contracts awarded to Claude Skelton Cline, a clergyman and radio personality, and EZ Shipping Limited, a freight and cargo carrier.

Governor Rankin made the announcement on Friday, saying that the audits reveal “failures in good governance and improper use of public funds”. Both reports were sent to the Office of the Attorney General, according to Mr. Rankin, “to assess whether the government should pursue recovery of funds spent on these contracts.” The documents were also sent to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution as well as police, “to assess if any offenses were committed,” the governor said.

In the case of Mr. Cline, the audit found that his consultancy with the government achieved nothing except lining his pockets. “Very little was gained from this arrangement and the government failed to receive value for money on these contracts,” the report concludes.

According to the report, the over \$350,000 paid to Mr. Cline across a two and a half year timespan generated “a number of focus areas which were mentioned but not developed or advanced by the consultancy.” At the end of the period, “none of the initiatives stipulated in the three contracts have been delivered. Similarly, none of the ad-hoc ‘non-contractual’ assignments have been realized,” except for certain Covid-19 initiatives the report called “self-determining.”

Not only did Mr. Cline’s consultancy not achieve anything at all, the report found, but there is no evidence to suggest Cline even tried to meet any of the deliverables outlined in his contracts.

The audit into the contract granted to EZ Shipping found that it cost taxpayers just over \$2 million to secure the services of two barges over five months, including two months in which the boats were not operational.

The report noted that to award these contracts, then-Premier Andrew Fahie overlooked seeking approval from “the governor, the Cabinet or the National Security Council [NSC]”. He reportedly then went on to unilaterally extend the arrangements twice.

The barges were engaged against the backdrop of border security, however as the report notes, “No evidence has been presented to support statements regarding the effectiveness of the barges. ...In addition, the continuance of illicit activities was evident in drug busts that occurred during the period the barges were in use.”

“I worked my a-double scribble off and did a phenomenal job for my part in a two-part contractual arrangement,” said Mr. Cline. “I feel no compulsion to defend myself. My documentation and record speaks for that and anything else, Jehovah will be my defense.”

Meanwhile, an investigation has been triggered after a third audit that had not yet gone through the proper channels, was leaked to the public. “While it is important that all audits received are published, it is important that due process is followed given the seriousness of matters. As such I await the tabling of the audit in the House of Assembly, at which point the report will be public with names of individual recipients redacted as appropriate,” Governor Rankin promised.

The auditor general’s special reports have been slammed by some lawmakers in the House. Ninth District Representative Vincent Wheatley and Territorial At-Large Member Carvin Malone called the report on EZ Shipping one-sided.

“The directions of Sir Gary Hickinbottom seem to have been well carried out by the auditor [general] and she needed not to have taken instructions but they were done anyway and they were given to the governor,” Mr.Malone said.

BVI Premier Dr. Natalio Wheatley also took issue with the report, saying in a recent House of Assembly meeting that because he, the NSC, and EZ Shipping owner Clyde Chalwell were not interviewed, the report is not “complete”.

However, Auditor General Sonia Webster pushed back: “The audit produced overwhelming evidence to support the conclusions in the report,” she told BVI media outlets last week.