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BVI Seeks to Pave Its Own Way in the Wake of Brexit

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Angela Burns **January 31, 2020**

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BVI flag flies on the Foreign Office building in London, 1 July 2015. By. FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE/FLICKR

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS — Now that the United Kingdom has exited the European Union (EU), effective 6:00 p.m. AST on January 31st, the government of the British Virgin Islands, a UK Overseas Territory, is intensifying efforts to deal with the widespread implications.

A referendum was held in the UK in June 2016, when 17.4 million people or 52 percent of the voters, opted for Britain to exit the EU after 47 years.

The EU is an economic and political union involving 28 European countries, which allows goods to move between member countries without any checks or extra charges. The EU also allows free movement of people, to live and work in whichever country they choose.

By virtue of the UK's membership in the EU, persons who hold UK passports, including BVI Islanders, enjoyed the benefit of visa-free travel to the European Schengen area and the ability to work, study and do business in the EU without restriction.

In a statement on Friday, BVI Premier Andrew Fahie pointed out that these privileges are now up for negotiation.

"It is important to point out here, that holders of British Overseas Territories passports fall under a different visa-free travel regime to the EU Schengen Area that is unaffected by Brexit," he said.

Mr. Fahie explained that the implications of Brexit on the BVI also extend to international relations and development cooperation.

"Politically, the BVI has enjoyed Associate Status in the EU as one of the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) directly associated with the bloc... (entitling) us to EU funding with which to tackle issues such as climate change, sustainable energy and marine biodiversity; and also recovery after Hurricanes Irma and Maria," he stated.

He said the BVI now loses its Associate Status in the EU and will have no access to the next round of EU funding earmarked for the French, Dutch and Danish Territories.

According to Mr. Fahie, "this is very unfortunate since the BVI is eligible for little other development assistance."

There will be no immediate changes to travel, study, business, work and funding arrangements before the end of this year. An implementation period between the UK and EU from February 1st to December 31st came into force on January 31st, 2020 during which time things remain the same while the two parties negotiate the terms on which a new relationship will work.

In a recent meeting with the UK Minister for the Overseas Territories and other OT leaders, the BVI government declared that the BVI wished to retain benefits and privileges with the EU, including visa free travel and tariff and quota free trade.

Mr. Fahie said his government recommended that the UK creates a Sustainable Development Fund for all Overseas Territories from which to fund climate change, biodiversity and sustainable energy projects.

He said the BVI also wanted to explore opportunities for international trade presented by Brexit.

The BVI Premier goes to London in March for the UK-OT Joint Ministerial Council where he is expected to reiterate the BVI's interests.

In the meantime, he said the BVI will maintain its relationship with the EU, in that the BVI London Office will continue to serve as BVI's EU Representation Office; Central Government will remain fully engaged with the EU on critical issues such as the EU list of non-cooperative tax jurisdictions on which BVI remains on the grey list; and BVI will continue membership in the Overseas Countries and Territories Association (OCTA) as an Associate Member to maintain a political presence in Brussels.

BVI recently engaged the EU on prospects for development cooperation as a Third Country Jurisdiction, particularly as partners of the EU Outermost Regions in the Caribbean that include Guadeloupe, Martinique, Sint Martin and French Guiana.

“Finally, we have officially requested Associate Membership in CARIFORUM, which is the Caribbean’s negotiating body on EU matters,” Mr. Fahie announced.

He said he will be following up on this request in just a few weeks’ time at the upcoming CARICOM Intersessional Meeting in Saint Kitts and Nevis.

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