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Staffing Concerns Arise as BVI's International Airport Temporarily Halts Operations

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The Terrance B. Lettsome International Airport on Beef Island, British Virgin Islands.

As the British Virgin Island prepares for increased air traffic to the territory when American Airlines begins direct flights from Miami this week, concerns about staffing levels of key personnel rose to the fore after the Terrance B. Lettsome International Airport was forced to suspend operations on Friday. At least one airline reportedly had to cancel flights.

The sudden closure occurred shortly after 1:00 p.m. that day, following news that an air traffic controller had fallen ill and was unable to take over the ensuing shift. International aviation regulations restrict the number of consecutive hours air traffic controllers can work. This is because of their critical role in ensuring the safety of passengers and crew in aviation operations.

The sudden absence, with nobody available to fill it, left the airport without adequate personnel to maintain operations. The airport reopened at 7:00 a.m. Saturday.

While at least one local news outlet - 284 Media - is reporting that the staff shortage is partly attributable to a sickout by British Virgin Islands Airports Authority workers protesting delayed salary increments, excessive work requirements, and inadequate compensation, Minister of Communications and Works Kye M. Rymer said that was not the case.

“While I recognize the many challenges faced today, I am pleased to report that there was no industrial action taken by the staff at our Air Traffic Control Tower, and the issues faced were as a result of the Authority’s inability to satisfy a regulatory requirement with regards to staffing levels,” Rymer said. He added that the BVI Airport Authority has been working to address these issues “at all levels on an ongoing basis to ensure a permanent solution.” He committed his Ministry and the Government of the Virgin Islands to collaborating with the authority to identify and eliminate any potential operational issues that may lead to similar complications in the future.

Rymer praised the dedication, passion, and commitment of the air traffic controllers to their roles and the British Virgin Virgin Island's economy.

Theodore Burke, chair of the BVIAA’s Board of Directors, expressed his regret over the inconvenience caused to the traveling public by the abrupt disruption.