GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Statement By The Premier And Minister Of Tourism Honourable Dr. Natalio D. Wheatley At The Fifth Sitting Of The Third Session Of The Fifth House Of Assembly Relationship with the United States Virgin Islands and the Commercial Recreational Vessel

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Madam Speaker, I rise to update this Honourable House on relations with the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) and the request of Governor Albert Bryan’s Administration for further negotiations on charter fees.

Let me begin by reaffirming our commitment to good neighbourly relations with the United States Virgin Islands. Our islands and people are inextricably linked.

At the heart of the relationship are blood ties. For generations, our peoples have intermingled and lived across the archipelago. Most, if not all, ancestral Virgin Islanders have relatives in either St. Thomas, St. John or St. Croix.

We share a common culture reflected in our food, religion, music, values and dialect. There is some research that suggests that 60 percent of St. Thomians have Virgin Islands (VI) heritage. There is no secret that over the years the USVI has produced governors and Lieutenant Governors with direct ancestral roots from Tortola, Virgin Gorda and Jost van Dyke.

The USVI remains home to many VIslanders and Belongers who are deeply attached to the Virgin Islands.

My Administration will always encourage and foster closer relations between the VI and USVI. We will remain constructive in our approach to any matters that arise between our respective jurisdictions, as we always have. After all, we are family, and trust and mutual respect are the keys to maintaining good relations and cooperation.

It is only reasonable to expect that the USVI and its Government share these values.

Madam Speaker, I recently received a letter from Governor Albert Byran Jr with whom I have enjoyed a good working relationship over the course of his Administration. He requested a meeting of the Inter-Virgin Islands Council (IVIC) in Washington, DC, that would involve United States Federal Authorities to reopen negotiations on the charter fees he and I previously agreed to after two rounds of negotiations last year.

A deadline was even set for when I, as Premier, must respond.

While I respect Governor Bryan, it is not in the spirit of good neighbourly relations to issue a summons or to set deadlines for your counterpart. It is also not in the spirit of good neighbourly relations to use pressure tactics against your neighbour and to make veiled threats about potential suffering of their people if certain demands are not met.

It is not the conduct I would consider states manly. It is not the conduct of a friend. It is not the conduct of equal partners committed to resolving our challenges through the IVIC. It is not, Madam Speaker, the conduct of an outgoing Governor interested in leaving a strong IVIC set up for the peaceful art and practice of conducting negotiations, building relations and managing our differences and interests.

My Government will not be drawn into a VI-USVI public spat about charter fees. My Administration is mature, and this matter will be handled diplomatically and not via a running social commentary on Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube or press

conferences.

Madam Speaker, I have simply reminded Governor Bryan that IVIC is a bilateral framework for dialogue between our two Territorial Governments.

The United States of America (USA) is not the VI's Administering Power. A meeting in Washington, DC involving Federal Authorities would no longer constitute a bilateral meeting. Rather, it would comprise a trilateral meeting that falls outside the scope of IVIC. This would warrant the participation of the United Kingdom (UK) for appropriate balance.

However, it is this Government's firm view that there is no need to escalate the matter of charter fees to the level of our Administering Powers. Our two neighbouring Governments have more than two decades of structured cooperation and are fully capable of resolving these matters ourselves.

Let me be clear, I have no issue with scheduling an IVIC meeting and providing the Bryan Administration with greater clarity on charter fees, but the appropriate place for such a meeting is right here in the archipelago.

I have therefore suggested to Governor Bryan that we convene an IVIC meeting in the VI in mid-October, where I hope we can reset relations and engage in focused constructive dialogue. My Government stands ready to host the Governor and his delegation on Tortola.

Madam Speaker, last week after preparing this statement I received another letter dated October 2, 2026, from Governor Bryan making a new proposal that is different from what we agreed to last year. My government will study the new proposal and will do whatever is in the interest of the Virgin Islands and the protection of our people and blue economy.

Madam Speaker, I would like to remind this Honourable House of what the revised Commercial Recreational Vessel Licence (CRVL) framework is delivering. The revised CRVL framework was never simply about revenue. It is about ensuring that those who derive commercial benefit from our waters contribute fairly to the systems that support them: our marine infrastructure, navigational and safety services, enforcement, and the modernisation of how Government serves the

industry. As I reported to this House in January, the framework has delivered clear improvements in non-tax revenue, and the revised fees support that work of modernisation.

One of the most tangible benefits for charter boat operators is the CRVL digital portal, which will enter production in time for the upcoming charter season. Following testing with a segment of industry companies, whom I thank for their candid feedback, the Ministry of Finance has added a number of enhancements.

These include a streamlined renewal pathway that retains valid documents, issues automated expiry reminders and maintains continuity of licensing while updated documentation is under review; online payment for cruising permits following CRVL renewal; new Temporary Importation categories for commercial recreational vessels under 500 gross registered tons and for non-commercial recreational vessels; a dedicated Home-Based Intra-Trading application process; and a requirement for foreign-based operators to appoint an approved local agent from a Ministry-managed list. The Ministry has also strengthened its administrative controls over licence expiry, additional charges, Government access and licence validation. These are tangible, valuable and progressive improvements to our charter yacht sector which is the backbone of our tourism economy.

Before closing, Madam Speaker, let me be resolute, that I will not allow anyone to interfere or jeopardise the over 50 years of constructive and productive relationship the VI enjoys with the United States Virgin Islands.

We will continue to manage our maritime space responsibly, transparently and in the interest of our people. Madam Speaker, I thank the marine industry for its partnership throughout this process, and the staff of the Ministry of Finance, His Majesty’s Customs, Immigration Department, Virgin Islands Shipping and Maritime (VISMA) and our technical partners for their diligent work. Additionally, I wish to thank the people of the Virgin Islands. You can rest assured that my Government will continue to make decisions affecting our yachting sector in consultation with you and our industry partners that are in the best interest of the Virgin Islands.

I thank you, Madam Speaker

Additional Documents or Media

- 2_hoa_statement_usvi_relations_and_crvl_framework-update.pdf