GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Statement By Premier and Minister of Finance Honourable Natalio D. Wheatley on the Update on the 2026 Virgin Islands Emancipation Festival

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Madam Speaker,

I rise to provide this Honourable House and the people of the Virgin Islands with a preliminary update on the recently concluded 72nd Virgin Islands Emancipation Festival.

Madam Speaker, our Emancipation Festival remains one of the most important expressions of our history, identity and culture. It commemorates the freedom of our ancestors from slavery while providing an opportunity for each generation of Virgin Islander to celebrate, preserve and pass forward the traditions, music, food, stories and cultural practices that define us as a people.

The 2026 Festival brought together residents, visitors, cultural practitioners, entertainers, vendors, community organisations and many others through a broad programme of activities that combined traditional Emancipation observances with pageantry, music, community celebrations and entertainment.

Madam Speaker, I wish at the outset to make clear that this is a preliminary update. The various Festival subcommittees are presently completing their individual reports, and the financial close-out of the Festival remains ongoing. Once the subcommittee reports have been received and the financial information has been properly reconciled and reviewed, a comprehensive report on the activities and financial performance of the 2026 Virgin Islands Emancipation Festival will be tabled at a future sitting of this Honourable House.

Madam Speaker, notwithstanding that ongoing work, the preliminary reporting allows us to identify several important features of this year's festival.

Central to the celebrations was the Torch Light Procession, which continues to carry particular historical significance as a symbol of the journey of our ancestors from enslavement to freedom and of the transmission of our history and heritage from one generation to the next. The procession received good community support. Importantly, the VIFFC has also identified the need to strengthen public education, beginning in our schools, so that our young people better understand the significance of Emancipation and the traditions associated with its commemoration.

The Festival also provided important platforms for the participation and development of our people. Asha Hynman was crowned Miss BVI 2026, while Xae'Mouri Harrigan and Jae'Nyiah Defraites captured the titles of Prince and Princess. The Calypso Competition was won by Eklund Adams, performing as “Officer,” while Lennell Stevens Jr. was crowned the 2026 Soca Monarch.

These competitions are important not merely as entertainment. They create opportunities for our people—particularly our children, young people, musicians and performers—to develop their talents, participate in our cultural traditions and showcase Virgin Islands creativity.

The Festival Village, named in honour of Ms. Lavida Cottoy, remained a principal gathering place during the Festival. Local bands and artistes such as Vibe, Xtreme and many others were given opportunities to perform before large audiences alongside regional and international performers, including Popcaan and Beres Hammond.

The wider programme also extended into our communities. Rise N Shine activities were held in Road Town and East End; the Food Fair brought together food, culture, entrepreneurship and community participation; and the East End/Long Look Boat Race and Carrot Bay Cultural Fiesta helped ensure that Festival remained connected to community-based traditions rather than being concentrated solely within the Festival Village.

The August Monday Parade, led by Grand Parade Marshal Roberto “Tico” Harrigan, was another major feature of the celebrations. Of particular encouragement was the participation of new troupes alongside longstanding participants. This renewed participation is important if we are to continue rebuilding and strengthening the Parade as one of the signature cultural expressions of the Emancipation Festival.

Madam Speaker, this year's programme also introduced Festival Go Green Night, placing greater emphasis on environmental awareness and sustainability. The initiative was successful and provided a foundation for introducing additional sustainable practices into future Festival celebrations. This is an important direction for Government. As we continue developing our Festival product, we must demonstrate that major cultural and entertainment events can be delivered in

ways that also promote responsible environmental practices.

Another area of deliberate focus was the marketing and promotion of the Emancipation Festival. Greater effort was made to position Festival beyond the Territory and to present it not only as a series of individual events, but as a means of showcasing the history, culture, music, food, hospitality and identity of the Virgin Islands.

That is an area which Government intends to examine carefully. Festival is first and foremost rooted in our history and our commemoration of Emancipation. However, a well-managed and authentically Virgin Islands Festival also has the potential to support our tourism product, generate opportunities for local entertainers and cultural practitioners, and create economic activity for vendors, transportation providers, accommodation establishments, restaurants and other businesses.

Madam Speaker, regrettably there were a few instances of undesirable behaviours which required police intervention. I encourage all residents to find peaceful and mature ways of resolving conflicts. Despite these isolated incidents, preliminary reports indicate that most activities were incident-free. That achievement reflects the collective efforts of the Virgin Islands Festival and Fairs Committee, the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force and other law enforcement and security personnel, emergency and health services, event organisers, vendors, volunteers, community partners and, importantly, the patrons themselves. I therefore extend the Government's appreciation to everyone who contributed to maintaining a safe and welcoming environment throughout the celebrations.

Madam Speaker, I recognise that there will understandably be considerable interest in the financial performance of the 2026 Festival. At this stage, however, it would be premature to present a final financial position. The financial close-out remains underway, and the Government considers it important that the information ultimately presented to this Honourable House is complete, reconciled and capable of providing a proper account of the public resources utilised in delivering the Festival.

The final report will therefore address, as appropriate, the approved resources available for Festival, actual expenditure, revenues generated, outstanding

obligations and the overall financial position following completion of the reconciliation process. This Government remains committed to transparency and accountability in the use of public funds. Accordingly, rather than provide incomplete figures today which may subsequently require revision, we will return to this Honourable House with the verified financial information when that work has been concluded.

Madam Speaker, while the financial performance of the Festival is an important measure of accountability, we must also recognise its wider contribution to economic activity throughout the Virgin Islands. The expenditure associated with organising and delivering the Festival extends beyond the individual events, creating opportunities for local businesses, entertainers, cultural practitioners, vendors, hotels, villas, small properties, contractors and service providers. From the engagement of musicians, sound and lighting technicians, security personnel and event organisers to the increased demand for transportation, accommodation, restaurants, food and beverage services, the Festival generates economic activity across several sectors. These expenditures also have the potential to create ripple effects throughout the economy, as income earned by businesses and individuals is subsequently spent on other goods and services within the Territory.

Equally, the Festival presents opportunities to attract visitors, encourage greater visitor expenditure and strengthen the Virgin Islands' position as a destination for cultural tourism. Although these wider economic benefits have not yet been quantified, they underscore the importance of viewing the Festival not solely as an expenditure of public funds, but also as a cultural undertaking capable of stimulating enterprise, supporting livelihoods and contributing to the broader economy. As we strengthen the planning and management of future Festivals, Government will seek to better understand and measure these economic contributions so that we can maximise the benefits to our people and businesses.

Madam Speaker, the preliminary assessment also points to several areas that will require attention as we plan future Festivals.

These include strengthening the educational and historical content surrounding Emancipation; increasing participation by local artistes, bands, troupes, vendors

and cultural practitioners; building upon the sustainability initiatives introduced this year; further developing the marketing of Festival; and maintaining a strong focus on safety and the overall patron experience. These priorities are also reflected in the VIFFC's preliminary assessment of the way forward.

As Government considers the lessons arising from the 2026 Festival, we must continue to ensure that the commemoration of Emancipation remains at the centre of Festival. Entertainment can complement that purpose, and Festival can contribute to tourism and economic activity, but its cultural and historical foundation must remain clear.

Madam Speaker, I therefore wish to thank the Virgin Islands Festival and Fairs Committee and its subcommittees, Government ministries and agencies, sponsors and partners, cultural practitioners, entertainers, vendors, volunteers, security and emergency personnel, and every resident and visitor who participated in this year's celebrations.

Most importantly, I thank the people of the Virgin Islands for continuing to embrace Emancipation Festival as an expression of our collective history, resilience and identity. I also want to thank the Minister for Culture Honourable Luce Hodge-Smith.

As the Committee appropriately reminds us, our responsibility is to honour our ancestors, educate our youth, preserve our heritage, celebrate our culture, support our people and share the spirit of the Virgin Islands with the world.

I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Additional Documents or Media

- 4_hoa_statement-emancipation_festival_2026_updated.pdf