GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Premier Wheatley's Opening Statement – 24 July Press Conference

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Good morning, colleagues, members of the media, and the Virgin Islands public.

I wish to begin this morning’s media conference by extending condolences to the families who have lost loved ones over the past recent weeks.

In particular, I wish to extend sympathies on behalf of the Government and The Virgin Islands community to the family and loved ones of Mr. K’Moi Walters, who lost his life to gun violence on 6 July, 2026. K’Moi’s death marked the first homicide of 2026 in The Virgin Islands.

K’Moi was a father, husband, brother, and son. He was well known and well loved in our community, where he was very active. At just 26 years of age, he was also someone in whom there was a lot of promise and potential.

Once again, I join with the national community in appealing for persons to say no to violence - especially gun violence. Ours is a peaceful country. Our people are peaceful, and over generations we have lived in love and unity. We have always been a resourceful, productive people. This is who we are, and we must do our best to keep it that way.

Sympathies to the people of Venezuela, Guyana and St Lucia

Before I turn to the main matters of today, I wish to pause to express, on behalf of the Government and people of The Virgin Islands, our deepest sympathy and solidarity with the people of Venezuela, Guyana and Saint Lucia, following the recent tragedies that have brought grief to our Caribbean community.

As we all know, two powerful earthquakes struck Venezuela on 24 June, causing widespread damage and claiming more than 5,300 lives, injuring more than 16,700 persons, and leaving tens of thousands still missing. In Guyana, the MV Barima ferry sank on 18 July, 2026. Approximately 100 persons are feared to have lost their lives. And in Saint Lucia, also on 18 July, 2026, a collision between two boats resulted in the death of four persons with 14 injured.

The Virgin Islands is a part of the wider Caribbean family. Additionally, the BVI is a very diverse community that includes nationals from these countries, who live, work and contribute meaningfully to our Virgin Islands community, and in their grief, we stand with them. The maritime accidents in Guyana and Saint Lucia also remind us, as a maritime people, of the preciousness of life at sea and the

importance of vigilance, safety and care in all marine activity.

To the families who are mourning, to those who are injured or otherwise affected, we extend our deepest condolences and prayers. May the souls of those who have passed rest in peace, and may their families and communities find comfort in this difficult time.

New United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary

Before I give my update on international affairs, I would like to publicly congratulate the Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham MP on his appointment as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK). I wish him well in post and look forward to working with his Administration.

I also congratulate the Rt. Hon. Edward Miliband MP on his appointment as Foreign Secretary and also wish him well in his post. I look forward to working with the FCDO under his leadership.

It is important for us to remember that international affairs is an important responsibility of any Government in the world we live in today. The Virgin Islands does not exist in isolation. We are a part of

the international community and global economy, which requires us to remain engaged with the rest of the world.

My Government maintains robust international engagement to advance and protect the interests of The Virgin Islands in this era of global uncertainty.

United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24)

On 8 June 2026, I attended the June Substantive Session of the Special Committee on Decolonization (Special Committee) or (C-24), at United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York. I was joined by my Special Envoy, Mr. Benito Wheatley, and then Acting Director of the International Affairs Secretariat, Ms. Dwynel Davis.

As I have previously stated, the Government of The Virgin Islands has an obligation under international law to report to the Special Committee on the progress of decolonization. My Administration takes this obligation very seriously.

In my official statement to the C-24, I provided an update on the Order in Council that was lifted by the United Kingdom government in March 2026. I also gave an update on plans for constitutional negotiations between The Virgin Islands and the UK on the political advancement of the Territory.

This information was taken into account in the Special Committee's final preparation of the draft UN resolution on the Question of the British Virgin Islands that was adopted last month. The draft resolution reaffirms our right to self-determination and will go through two more rounds of approvals before final adoption by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) later this year.

In the margins of the Special Committee session, I had a bilateral meeting with the Chargé d'Affaires of the UK Mission in New York Mr. James Kariuki CMG. Our discussion on the UK-Virgin Islands relationship was constructive, and I stressed the importance of constitutional advancement.

I thanked Mr. Kariuki for his positive engagement over the years, particularly in his previous role as Deputy Permanent Representative of the UK Mission in New York. I wish him well in his future endeavours after his tenure in New York ends this summer.

While at UN Headquarters, I also had a very productive bilateral meeting with the delegation of Belize, who agreed to share their expertise on climate change trust funds with us.

56th Annual Meeting of the Board of the Governors of the Caribbean Development Bank

From 1-5 June 2026, I attended the 56th Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) in Nassau, Bahamas. The meeting focused on advancing innovative, forward-

looking responses to global volatility, fiscal constraints, and climate-related risks. I was accompanied by Financial Secretary, Mr. Jeremiah Frett.

Notably, we held a bilateral meeting with the President of the CDB, Mr. Daniel Best, and members of his team. Among other things, we discussed:

- The Virgin Islands' current loan portfolio;
- Potential financing of the extension of the runway at the Terrance B. Lettsome International Airport; and
- The Virgin Islands' greater participation in the CDB's Special Development Fund that provides concessional financing to Borrowing Member Countries.

While at the Annual General Meeting, I was also very pleased by the participation of our Youth Representative, Mrs. Feeana Andrews-Paul, at CDB's Youth Fire Forum.

Building on the strong partnership between The Virgin Islands and the CDB, we are preparing to invite the CDB to update its Country Engagement Strategy for The Virgin Islands that will provide more opportunities for technical assistance and other facilities available at the bank.

78th Meeting of the OECS Authority

On 21 June 2026, I attended the 78th Meeting of the OECS Authority in Antigua and Barbuda alongside other Heads of Government and Government representatives. I was accompanied by the then Acting Director of the International Affairs Secretariat, Ms. Dwynel Davis. My Special Envoy, Mr. Benito Wheatley, who serves as the Territory's OECS Commissioner, joined virtually.

The meeting focused on the impact of an increasingly challenging geopolitical landscape and global economic environment on the economies of the OECS.

We discussed how we could strengthen the subregion's collective response to the most pressing international challenges by boosting food security, energy security, trade diversification, connectivity, and development financing. We also talked about harnessing the full potential of the blue economy as a driver of economic growth.

CARICOM 51st Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government

From 5-8 July 2026, I attended the 51st Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in Saint Lucia. I was

accompanied by my Special Envoy, Mr. Benito Wheatley, who serves as the Territory's CARICOM Representative, and Ms. Dwynel Davis, the then Acting Director of the International Affairs Secretariat.

It was my honour to join other Heads of Government in welcoming Martinique and French Guiana to the CARICOM family as the newest Associate Members.

In our deliberations, I was pleased with CARICOM's support for those Associate Members engaged in constitutional negotiations and governance reforms, including The Virgin Islands, and Heads' acknowledgement of the importance of safeguarding and advancing the right to self-determination of the people of those Associate Members also classified as Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGTs). We also discussed climate change and the risk of natural disasters, and agreed to establish a CARICOM

Reinsurance Task Force, with a view to establishing a coordinated Regional Insurance and Reinsurance Strategy for CARICOM.

Constitutional Negotiations

Please permit me to say a few words about constitutional negotiations with the UK.

In May 2026, I traveled to the UK for a bilateral meeting with Overseas Territories (OT) Minister, Hon. Stephen Doughty MP. I was joined by my Special Envoy, Mr. Benito Wheatley, Financial Services Envoy, Mrs. Sherri Ortiz, and Acting Director of the BVI London Office, Ms. Tracy Bradshaw.

Among other things, we discussed:

- The extension of the runway at the Terrance B. Lettsome International Airport; and
- legitimate interest registers.

We also had preliminary discussions on constitutional negotiations and agreed timing for the first round of talks.

As you are aware, those talks took place here in The Virgin Islands from 13-16 July 2026. I led The Virgin Islands delegation, while the UK delegation was led by Mr. Nicholas Wareham.

The deliberations between our respective negotiating teams were constructive and focused on gaining a shared understanding of The Virgin Islands' constitutional proposals. I am pleased with the discussions and confident that The Virgin Islands' position is well understood by the UK.

I thank our entire team, both members and resource persons, for their high degree of professionalism and thorough preparation.

Completion of the first round of talks paves the way for the next round of negotiations in London in September 2026 to continue the process.

Association of Caribbean States Greater Caribbean Day

Let me end my update on international affairs by wishing everyone a happy Greater Caribbean Day! This is the first year this day is being officially celebrated by all the Members and Associate Members of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS). The regional body includes all of the countries bound to the Caribbean Sea that cuts across North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. Our rich cultural diversity and shared history is our strength and worthy of recognition.

250th Anniversary of Freedom

During the week of 28 June – 3 July 2026, The Virgin Islands stood together to honour one of the most powerful chapters in our history: the 250th Anniversary of the Self-Manumission of the Long Look Free People. The commemoration of this historic event was marked by a holiday on Tuesday, 30 June 2026, the actual day of the self-manumission.

The week of activities was well received, dignified, and executed to a high standard. From the official opening and historical reflections to the cultural presentations, community gatherings, youth and educational engagements, church and thanksgiving observances, heritage-focused activities, and the wider

Emancipation-linked celebrations, the commemoration reminded us who we are and where we came from.

It solidified Long Look's rightful place in Virgin Islands history and reaffirmed its critical role in our annual Emancipation celebrations. The story of the Long Look Free People is not simply a Long Look story. It is a Virgin Islands story. The spirit of the Long Look Free People is the spirit of The Virgin Islands.

The national value of this commemoration is priceless. It is an investment in history, education, identity, pride, unity, and nation-building. No nation can move confidently into the future if it is unwilling to honour the courage, sacrifice, and vision that made that future possible.

In 1776, the Long Look Free People began a journey of freedom, self-determination, responsibility, and community-building. Today, as we enter a critical period of constitutional negotiations, their story speaks to us with renewed urgency. It reminds us why we must continue the journey they began and why we must negotiate a new constitution that reflects our dignity, our maturity, our history, and our right to shape our own destiny.

Next week, we will launch the official 80-page commemorative booklet, which will cover the story of the Long Look Free People and recapture the week of activities marking this historic and nation-building commemoration. A limited number of printed copies will be available, but through a QR code and digital access, it will be made available to everyone. This booklet will tell the remarkable Long Look story, trace the genealogy that connects so many Virgin Islanders to that legacy, including 18 elected members of the Legislature, and serve as a source of education, pride, and inspiration.

This publication will be followed in the fourth quarter of this year by a 150-page coffee table book entitled *The Long Look Story*. Combined, these publications will strengthen our identity, lift national pride, and secure our history for generations to come.

This was a national duty. It was a statement of who we are, where we came from, and where we must go.

The Long Look Free People began this journey. We have an obligation to continue it.

Fancy Me Commemoration

This coming Sunday, 26 July 2026, the Territory will pause to observe the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the *Fancy Me* schooner with a remembrance ceremony at the Sir Olva Georges Plaza in Road Town. I invite members of the public to come out and join us as we honour the lives that were lost, support the

descendants and families connected to this tragedy, and reflect together on an important chapter in the story of our Virgin Islands.

The *Fancy Me* tragedy remains one of the most painful maritime disasters in our history. One hundred years ago, a vessel carrying our people was lost at sea, leaving families and communities to mourn, and leaving an imprint on the collective memory of the Territory. While time has passed, the sorrow, courage, resilience and lessons of that moment continue to speak to who we are as a people shaped by the sea.

This commemoration is therefore not only an act of remembrance; it is an act of cultural preservation. It reminds us of the strength of our ancestors, the importance of recording and passing on our history, and the responsibility we have to ensure that events such as the sinking of the *Fancy Me* are never forgotten. In remembering, we honour those who came before us and help future generations understand the experiences, sacrifices and resilience that have helped to shape The Virgin Islands.

Emancipation Festival

Next week Monday, 27 July 2026, The Virgin Islands will proudly begin the 72nd Annual Emancipation Festival, a treasured season of remembrance, celebration and community. The activities will commence at 6:30 pm with the 72ndAnnual Torchlight Procession, beginning at the venue at the back of the Administration Complex and ending at the Festival Grounds.

The Torchlight Procession is one of the most meaningful traditions of our Festival. It reminds us of the journey from bondage to freedom, honours the courage and resilience of our ancestors, and sets the tone for a celebration rooted in history, heritage and hope.

This year, we celebrate under the theme, *“Culture Rising, Hearts Aligned, VI Festival, One of a Kind,”* which captures the spirit of unity, pride and cultural expression that defines this important occasion. The Festiville is named in honour of Ms. Lavida Cottoy, a longstanding cultural contributor whose service has helped to preserve and promote Virgin Islands festival traditions.

Over the coming days, residents and visitors can look forward to a vibrant calendar filled with entertainment, cultural activities, music, pageantry, food on sale, family-friendly gatherings and opportunities to enjoy the best of Virgin Islands creativity and hospitality.

I invite everyone across the Territory to come out, participate fully, support the organisers, vendors, performers and culture bearers, and enjoy the Festival in a spirit of togetherness. As we celebrate, I urge everyone to prioritise safety, look out for one another, obey the guidance of the authorities, and ensure that this year’s Emancipation Festival is both joyful and safe for all.

Christmas in July

I also remind persons that tomorrow we have Christmas in July in Pond Bay in Virgin Gorda, and we also look forward to persons enjoying themselves. We invite persons to this important tourism event.

Congratulations to recent Graduates

Moving on to other matters.

I take this opportunity to congratulate all students across the Territory who have recently graduated. Your hard work, perseverance and achievements are worthy of commendation, and you have made your families, schools and communities proud. As you move forward into the next stage of your academic journey or into your professional lives, I encourage you to continue striving for excellence, to remain

focused on your goals, and to use your talents and education to contribute meaningfully to the future of the Virgin Islands. I wish each of you every success in the exciting chapter ahead.

White Coat Ceremony

Later today, the Ponce Health Sciences University (PHSU)-BVI medical school, situated right here in Tortola at the Paraquita Bay H. Lavity Stoutt Community College (HLSCC) campus, will hold its second White Coat Ceremony.

This marks another important milestone for the PHSU-BVI's medical degree programme. The level of interest in the programme has already surpassed initial expectations and is expected to continue growing. I am advised that the first cohort comprised of 39 students. At today's ceremony, 50 new

students will join the programme. By January 2027, an additional 30 students will begin their studies, bringing total number of students for this academic year to 119. PHSU-BVI projects enrolment in July 2027 of 80 to 100 new students. More than 90 percent of the students are foreign students.

This is proving what we have said before: Education Tourism is a real and viable possibility for The Virgin Islands, and it can become an important part of our economic diversification and human development strategy. The growing number of foreign students and faculty will need accommodation and other services, thereby creating opportunities for property owners and service providers.

I thank PHSU for the confidence they have shown in bringing their medical school to the BVI, and I acknowledge the important partnership of the Government of The Virgin Islands and the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College in helping to make this vision a reality.

Tribute to Adaejah Hodge

I also wish to once again recognize and congratulate all of our Virgin Islands athletes, and one in particular, the outstanding young Virgin Islander, Adaejah Hodge, for her remarkable recent achievements in track and field.

Competing at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Championships last month, Adaejah captured the women's 200 metres title in a historic time of 21.68 seconds. That performance broke the NCAA collegiate record of 21.80 seconds, set by Abby Steiner in 2022, and established a new Virgin Islands national record. It was also a world-leading performance at the time, placing her among the very fastest women ever to run the event.

Adaejah also rewrote the record books in the 100 metres, running 10.63 seconds in the preliminary round. That time broke the NCAA Championships record of 10.75 seconds, previously held by Sha'Carri Richardson, shattered her own personal best and national record, and made her one of the fastest women in the history of the event. She then went on to earn silver in the 100 metres final, showing not only speed, but resilience, maturity and competitive strength across multiple rounds.

I am advised that Adaejah is expected to compete in the 23rd Commonwealth Games currently ongoing in Glasgow, Scotland, running from 23 July to 2 August, 2026. Of course, we wish Adaejah *God's speed* as she takes to the tracks.

Beyond the medals and records, these achievements are significant because of what they represent. Adaejah continues to place The Virgin Islands on the global athletics map in a powerful way. She continues to demonstrate that talent from a small Territory can stand confidently on the biggest stages, break barriers, and inspire young people throughout The Virgin Islands to believe that excellence is within their reach. On behalf of the Government and people of The Virgin Islands, I say congratulations. Adaejah also made us proud with her participation in the Diamond League, capturing medals there as well. We are proud of you, and we look forward to all that is still ahead.

I thank you and I will now hand you over to the Acting Director of Communications, Mr. Kareem-Nelson Hull, who will moderate the question-and-answer segment of this morning's media conference.

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Additional Documents or Media

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