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Special Political and Decolonization (Fourth Committee)
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Statement by Hon. Natalio D. Wheatley, Premier of the British Virgin Islands

Mr. Chair

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning

I bring you warm greetings from the Government and people of the British Virgin Islands (BVI).

I would like to sincerely thank the Fourth Committee for granting me this opportunity to address you today.

Excellencies, our quest for the total and unequivocal decolonization of the BVI continues and is at a critical stage.

We are currently in the process of negotiating a new constitution with the United Kingdom (UK). The official negotiations kicked off in August with a first round of talks, which was followed by a second round in September. The deliberations have been constructive thus far and my meetings with the new UK Overseas Territories Minister Uma Kumaran.

Another round of negotiations is anticipated in the weeks ahead while technical and political discussions continue in the intervening period. Devolution of authority will be an important marker of progress. The objective is to agree a new constitution by the end of the year that meets the BVI's aspirations.

The Government's official negotiating position was adopted by the House of Assembly in April. It was unanimously approved and reflects the unified position of all political parties in the legislature.

My Government is seeking what has been described as a pre-independence constitution that provides for full internal self-government, a bicameral legislature, and a pathway to full sovereignty.

Please permit me to set out for you the key constitutional provisions we have proposed.

1. The Premier should Chair Cabinet, instead of a UK appointed Governor. This is already the case in other British Overseas Territories such as Gibraltar and Bermuda; and also in the Crown Dependencies.
2. A Senate should be created to establish a bicameral legislature. This is already the case in Bermuda.
3. Responsibility for the public service should be devolved to the elected arm of Government under the authority of a Minister, instead of a UK appointed Governor. This is currently case in the Crown Dependencies.
4. Responsibility for internal security should be devolved to the elected arm of Government under the authority of a Minister, instead of a UK appointed Governor.
5. The current delegated areas of external affairs should also be devolved to the elected arm of Government, which is already the case in practice.
6. There should be a defined pathway to full sovereignty in which the people of the Virgin Islands exercise their right to self-determination.

Excellencies, Friends, these are the core constitutional proposals which the BVI is negotiating. The UK has also introduced its own proposals which are points for further discussion in the negotiations.

As a matter of principle, we also believe the unilateral authority of the UK to suspend or remove the democratic rights of the people of the BVI should be eliminated altogether, even if just on moral grounds.

Progressing the Territory along the path of self-determination is an international obligation on the UK under Article 73 of the UN Charter. The constitutional negotiations position the UK to meet this obligation in the BVI's case.

The C-24 visiting mission report to the Territory stated that we are ready for the next step.

This is supported by the fact that the BVI has been self-funded since 1978 and receives no financial assistance from the UK. It is the local leadership of the BVI that has built up our islands brick by brick over seven decades.

We also recently completed the most comprehensive governance reform in the history of the Territory.

As we continue to position the society for self-determination, we are taking steps on the ground to help prepare the public to meaningfully engage. This includes setting up a Decolonization Commission that

will help educate the local population on the UN sanctioned options for decolonization with respect to integration, free association and independence.

The Decolonization Commission will help ensure the public is aware of the obligations and responsibilities of independence so that this option is approached in a responsible manner.

My Government has no doubt that as a country we would thrive.

The BVI is grateful to this committee and the C-24 for your steadfast support. We greatly appreciate the understanding and solidarity of nations across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America.

I want to extend very special thanks to our Caribbean family, CARICOM, the OECS, the ACS, and the Caribbean Territories for standing with us throughout this journey.

Mr. Chair, Excellencies, the BVI looks forward to updating this committee and the C-24 on the outcome of constitutional negotiations between the BVI and UK in due course.

We will continue to be a constructive partner as we aspire to achieve a full measure of self-government.

I thank you.