

The Rt Hon Sir Gary Hickinbottom,
Commissioner,
British Virgin Islands
Commission of Inquiry

24th June 2021

Dear Commissioner,

Re: Personal Criticisms made by The Hon. Julian Willock

I refer to the recent 'Position Statement' submitted to the British Virgin Islands, Commission of Inquiry by the Speaker of the House of Assembly, The Hon. Julian Willock.

Specifically, I refer to paragraph 20 which has been drawn to my attention and which contains what I consider to be personal criticism of decisions I made as the previous Commissioner of Police in the BVI.

In the relevant paragraph the Hon. Speaker asserts that *"immediately after Hurricanes Irma and Maria the Commissioner of Police hired a number of foreign nationals as police officers without doing the appropriate background checks whatsoever, in fact it is extremely likely that he would have hired persons that were well known criminals elsewhere in the region"*

This statement is false, inaccurate and in my view defamatory towards myself as the Commissioner of Police at the relevant time highlighted. To my knowledge the Hon. Speaker was not part of the Government of the BVI at that time, nor present in any meetings where security decisions were agreed, including the decision to seek assistance from external police forces.

After the impact of the hurricanes in September 2017 the BVI was completely devastated and very quickly there was a clear indication of a potential breakdown in law and order. Initially, only 40% of the RVIPO had reported for duty and looting of shops and business premises had occurred. In addition, was the escape of all prisoners held at HMP Balsam Ghut. The community was exposed and vulnerable, urgently needing reassurance.

With operational responsibility for security at the time, I immediately recommended to the Governor, Mr. Gus Jaspert that we invoke 'mutual aide' procedures from the United Kingdom to urgently increase policing resources within the Territory. This was discussed and agreed with the then Premier, Dr Orlando Smith and those BVI Government Ministers available at the time.

An approach was made to the UK Home Office via the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and agreement reached with National Police Chiefs Council to provide unarmed uniformed officers to the territory, to supplement the RVIPO. All UK officers are vetted on appointment to their relevant UK force, and every officer deployed was selected by the Chief Constable in charge of the force that they were seconded from. All officers deployed were experienced servicing UK police officers. All 43 forces of England and Wales were involved in some form with regard to this response to the BVI.

It was determined by the Home Office however, that armed support could not be made available via UK forces. As a shortage of armed capability was also a factor in the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes, I also requested support from other UK Overseas Territories. Using the existing mutual aide Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreed with the other UK Overseas Territories Police Commissioners, I was able to source highly trained firearms response officers from the Bermuda Police Service and the Royal Cayman Islands Police Service.

The access to these Overseas Territories officers through the MOU was overseen by the FCO coordinator based in Miami. A clear requirement was provided to the relevant Commissioners of Police in Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, and deployments were then made alongside the UK

officers over a period of some 3-4 months. Again, the armed officers deployed from the other UK Overseas Territories were existing, highly trained specialist officers with many years experience. I am aware that both Bermuda and Cayman forces have vetting procedures in place as part of their normal recruitment policies as well as additional vetting requirements for firearms officers.

I would add that all of the officers provided under both mutual aide arrangements (UK and Overseas Territories) were at all times deployed under my command and that of the RVIPF. At no time were any of the officers deployed operating independently, or under any other command arrangement.

In conclusion, all police officers deployed at the time concerned under the agreements with the UK Home Office and through the MOU with the UK Overseas Territories, were experienced and vetted officers. It would simply have been reckless and irresponsible to attempt to supplement policing and security with anyone else other than existing serving, officers from other affiliated jurisdictions. Even in an extreme crisis as this was, where rapid response and decision making was necessary, all due diligence was undertaken to ensure the safety and security of the residents of the British Virgin Islands.

The statement made by the Hon. Speaker is pure fabrication, and certainly is clearly not based upon any knowledge of the subject that he seeks to use as an example. His baseless allegations are an affront to all of the hard working officers that supported the BVI at a time of exceptional need.

I submit this response in order that the Commission has an accurate understanding of exactly what occurred in relation to this matter and can advise that this information may be further confirmed by the Ex Governor, Mr Gus Jaspert, the Chair of the UK Police Chiefs Council and the Governments and Police Commissioners of Bermuda and the Cayman Islands.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Matthews', written in a cursive style.

Michael B Matthews
(Retired Commissioner of Police)