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**SECOND INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR THE ERADICATION OF COLONIALISM**

**Caribbean regional seminar on the implementation of the Second International Decade  
for the Eradication of Colonialism: challenges and opportunities in the process of  
decolonization in today's world**

**Frigate Bay, Saint Kitts and Nevis  
12 to 14 May 2009**

**STATEMENT**

**BY THE REPRESENTATIVE**

**OF SAINT HELENA**

**CARIBBEAN REGIONAL SEMINAR OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE OF 24**

**Frigate Bay, St. Kitts and Nevis**

**12 to 14 May 2009**

**TEXT OF ADDRESS**

**BY**

**ANTHONY GREEN**

**MEMBER OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL  
ISLAND OF ST. HELENA  
SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the privilege and opportunity to address this Committee.

To reach here from the Island of St. Helena I had to leave on 21 April, some three weeks ago. There was no opportunity to leave any later.

The Island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean is both small and remote and has no airport. We have a ship that plies between St. Helena, Ascension Island (700 miles away), Walvis Bay and Cape Town with two trips a year to the United Kingdom. This provides a regular but infrequent service.

With an area of just 47 square miles and a population of around 4,000, the Island lies some 1200 miles west of South Africa, 1000 miles south of the equator and 4,400 miles away from Britain.

About five years ago the Island's population was more than 6,000 – the rapid decrease by some 2000 is central to our current predicament. There is no industry as such and no natural resources. Our key export is our people which, ironically, is creating a very serious problem on the Island.

A high percentage of our population is now elderly and with many of our young and middle aged having left or leaving there is already insufficient human resources to man key services, provide an adequate skill base and to look after the elderly. Children are being cared for by grandparents and that has resulted in a growing number of unfortunate social problems.

We do not have a sovereignty issue with Britain. Neither does St. Helena wish to be decolonised in the sense that it neither can have, nor wants, independence. If we had a new partnership with Britain emanating from the clear will of the people of St. Helena, through this very act of self determination that goal may indeed be seen as achievable.

We, the people of St. Helena, therefore seek the support of this Committee to urge the British Government to assist our Island (their Island) in two particular respects:

Firstly, we wish to have a new partnership with Britain. We strongly believe that we should not be categorised as a British Overseas Territory.

Additionally, the relationships between St. Helena and her two dependencies, Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha also needs to be clarified,

Secondly, for Britain to immediately fulfil her long standing and repeated promises to build an airport on the Island.

These needs may seem insignificant but the consequences of not achieving either soon, both intricately intertwined, threatens our very existence. We could easily become an endangered species.

The Island of St. Helena was discovered in the sixteenth century and had no indigenous population. In 1659, Britain brought the first settlers to the Island. Some years later others followed after the Great Fire of London. Of course other nationalities came, some escaping from ships. The Island was also a big slave depot and played a key role in assisting Britain to combat the Slave Trade.

Still now, some five hundred years later, the Islanders, Saints as we are known, have remained loyal to Britain. Our way of life is modelled on the British, our values are British and our customs are British.

At the time of the East India Company rule, St. Helena became a very important staging post for Britain. We played a key part in Britain establishing herself as a great trading nation in the East. The Island also provided a safe haven and a half-way house from which Britain could protect the key seas routes. St. Helena not only assisted Britain in acquiring raw materials but also to market these goods in the East. There is no doubt that the Island of St. Helena was settled by Britain for its economic purposes.

In more recent times, our people have fought in the Great War, the Second World War and in 1982 our only life line, our ship the RMS "St. Helena", was used in the Falklands conflict. Many of the crew were St. Helenians. Islanders continue today to serve in the armed forces, including Iraq and Afghanistan.

From these brief facts you will see the basis on which we Islanders believe we are indeed part of Britain and seek a new and more appropriate relationship. A new relationship that was promised by a British Minister in 2002.

We are classified as a British Overseas Territory which we believe is not appropriate. As such we have to compete with other underdeveloped countries for funding. St. Helena cannot be said to be developed by any means but we see ourselves as part of Britain even if geographically far apart.

This new partnership would be through constitutional change. As a new draft constitution is currently on the table for discussion in the months ahead, this will provide an ideal opportunity for this to be considered. A clear preference as to what form a new relationship should take has yet to emerge.

An examination of this same point a few years ago, through the determined efforts of the Citizenship Committee on St. Helena, indicated that the kind of new relationship that might be in St. Helena's interest is similar to that enjoyed by St. Pierre et Miquelon, the French Overseas Territory. However, any preferred option would be one that emerges from a process of full consultation.

There is, I perceive, some anxiety to have this draft accepted and implemented as soon as possible. While it does contain essential and much needed changes it does not though go a long way towards enabling Islanders to take more responsibly for their own internal affairs.

In St. Helena, politics have not significantly progressed over the last twenty years and the changes that have occurred have been mainly procedural. The changes proposed in the draft constitution do not appear on the face of it to allow more accountability by individual elected members.

A new partnership with increased accountability for elected representatives for local affairs would need to benefit from increased economic activity. It is to that subject that I now turn.

Economic activity on the Island is very low. I mentioned earlier how small and isolated St. Helena is and that we have the increasing problem of our younger people steadily leaving the Island.

In 2002 the British Government decided that the only way forward economically for St. Helena would be to have an airport. Some two years earlier it had rejected a private sector proposal to build an airport.

In 2005 the decision for a public funded airport to be built was confirmed by Gareth Thomas, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development.

Over the past seven years many reports have been written by consultants, feasibility studies undertaken and an understanding reached that St. Helena would need to make changes and also to have its new Strategic Plan predicated upon having an airport. During that same period there has in addition to the planning been much investment by the local private sector who has now been seriously misled. The resulting financial problems are also very real.

Since the announcement in 2005 St. Helena has honoured its commitments amongst which has been the introduction of many changes to its laws. A contractor to build the airport was selected but recently instead of the British Government confirming that funding had been approved for the much needed airport we were told that the project had been put on pause because of the world financial crisis.

The global effects of the world wide financial situation are appreciated suffice to say though that it is indeed Britain's call if an airport cannot be built for that reason.

However, as Britain has since embarked on yet another round of consultation it suggests that the ruling out of an airport by Britain is not simply going to be on financial grounds.

In preparing the consultation process which is soon to get underway on the Island, Britain has made it clear that its preference is for the option of extending the 'pause' for up to five years. Effectively, to Islanders, this would represent a 'no' decision!

The consultation process is also far from simple requiring written responses from St. Helenians wherever they may live. This process itself is a deterring factor as the majority of St. Helenians would simply prefer to say either a 'yes' or a 'no' to air access for the development of a tourist industry. Their detailed arguments have been documented

comprehensively over many years and it was Britain's experts themselves who identified that an airport is the only way forward economically for St. Helena.

There is also another risk that this new round of consultation will pose. The history of broken promises by Britain may well create apathy and therefore a low participation which would play right into Britain's hands. It is going to be imperative that Islanders respond in significant numbers and leave Britain in no doubt what we Saints want. That would leave Britain to seek other reasons if they want to say no.

We need an airport and we need that airport NOW! Any delay will be nothing but disastrous. If we do not get an airport there is no guarantee that the same level of service the Island has enjoyed for the past thirty years will continue. This service is neither sufficient nor suitable to generate a tourist industry and to run the risk of being served with an even less suitable means of access would simply condemn the Island to ultimate economic extinction.

I said earlier that St. Helena was there when Britain needed her. Now the Island of St. Helena wants Britain to understand its unique and currently precarious position.

The 20 to 50 year olds are leaving. Two thousand over the past seven years or so. Figures may well show that it has stabilised because of the recent prospect of having an airport but currently the drain is starting again. If numbers of people remain somewhat static at the moment the make-up of these numbers, in my personal opinion, is changing. The young and middle aged is leaving being replaced by returning Saints of retiring age.

This does not solve the problem of having an adequate skill base to operate our services nor will it provide the resources to care for the elderly. What it will do instead is to increase the potential numbers requiring care and attention and place ever increasing demands on local resources. The trend of recruiting increasing numbers from overseas has already begun and will increase the financial burden on Britain. At the moment the Island of St. Helena is a 'House of Cards'.

There would be further potential negative effects. St. Helenians working abroad also provide a major source of income for the Island. They return home regularly, spend money and while away make remittance to build houses and buy into services. They make a major contribution to the economy. The best tourist industry we have is our own returning 'Saints'.

Unless the decision is taken soon to build an airport, together with the associated development within the heritage and eco-tourism field - the area from which we would hope to benefit from having improved access - these St. Helenians who contribute significantly to the welfare of the Island, will turn away and settle in Britain and other parts of the world.

This in turn could trigger the collapse of the private sector on St. Helena which would then be either doomed or at the very least become an ever increasing financial burden on the British tax payer. More significantly we would become an endangered species.

The assessments made by Britain herself show that long term economic sustainability is solely dependent on air access. No other option would have the long term effect of significantly reducing and hopefully eventually eliminating the need for grant in aid.

These were the findings of Britain's own experts and it is a point that is not denied in the new consultation document recently produced by Britain.

St. Helena has made great strides to meet its side of the bargain. We want to be party to decisions that makes our Island less financially dependent on Britain. If the 'pause' does not come to an end now it will inevitably mean that our society will dwindle even further both in terms of its population and its economy.

We, the people of St. Helena, therefore seek the UN's support in urging the British Government to honour its obligations under article 73 (e) included amongst which is to promote to the utmost the well being of the inhabitants. That our interests will be best served by having a special relationship with Britain and rather than wither and die, also grant us now an airport which will serve the interests of both St. Helena and Britain.

The well being of the inhabitants in St. Helena is dependent on having an airport, not later but now!