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The Virgin Islands

America's underbelly

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A lovely place, and woefully unprepared for a terrorist attack

THE beaches are white, lush forests cover the mountains, the turquoise sea is clear to its bed and the sun shines constantly. Tourists flock there by plane and cruise ship. Yet the Virgin Islands—St Croix, St Thomas and St John, all official Insular Territories of the union—are also perhaps America's most vulnerable point. Their infrastructure is weak; the islands are isolated geographically, 1,000 miles away from mainland America and some miles away from each other, and they are unprotected. Almost all fuel, food and medicine comes in by sea. On each island, a single generating plant provides electricity; damage to it would cut off all public power and water, and there is no grid to import electricity from a neighbouring city or state.

Illegal aliens land in the Virgin Islands openly and regularly, yet they are rarely caught. One US Customs man says that the islands, and St John in particular, are "busy drop-off points for human smugglers", and adds: "It's not a big secret that there are organisations using the Virgin Islands to get people into the United States."

Federal officials have compiled a long list of worries. A fishing boat carrying explosives might crash into a cruise ship. A cruise ship might be subject to a biological attack. A land-based anthrax attack might be launched on crowds during Carnival. Terrorists could easily use the St Thomas/St Croix seaplanes as a weapon, because they take off and land from the harbours many times each day and there is no passenger screening. On St Thomas, these planes fly so close to the cruise ships and ferry boats (almost as close as the boobies who swoop past with their fresh-caught, wriggling fish) that a deviation from the flight path would crash the seaplane into a cruise ship or ferry in less than ten seconds.

If any of these events caused a fire at sea, the Virgin Islands would have almost no means of fighting it. Emergency services are primitive in the extreme. Police, fire, paramedic services, search and rescue, communications and roads are all inadequate. On St Thomas there is sometimes only one government ambulance on duty for the whole island of 55,000 people (not counting tourists). On St John, where there are no traffic lights and where the main occupation is watching people waiting for the ferry, there is never more than one ambulance on duty. The Emergency Operations Centre, too, is in disrepair. There is no general evacuation plan.

The police department (VIPD) is under-trained and under-equipped and law enforcement is, at best, inconsistent and sporadic. Although most officers are hardworking and honest, complacency is endemic (drinking while driving is winked at here), and the force as a whole is not trusted.

As is typical on isolated islands, almost everyone has two or more jobs. A single person may be a police officer, a National Guard member, a Red Cross shelter manager and a part-time ferry captain, all in one. When some disaster occurs, these people are likely to be suffering its effects themselves, and therefore unable to help. After Hurricane Marilyn in 1995, the VIPD lost 90% of its vehicles, and many officers and their families were reduced to sleeping in cars.

The bigger obstacles to improving security are political and social. In government, mismanagement, nepotism and cronyism are widespread. One sewer-repair contract, said a US district judge, "reeked of politics and political influence, and, quite possibly, of political corruption". The former deputy commissioner of health was convicted of cashing more than \$100,000 in duplicate pay cheques for five years. On St John some favoured souls are allowed to lease government-owned property downtown for private business for as little as 69 cents per square foot. And when one prosecutor requested the names that went with certain licence plates suspected of criminal activity, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles tipped off the suspects.

These problems are compounded by racism, poverty, stark and increasing economic disparity and poor education. During the current governor's first term, all the public schools lost their accreditation. Tourism is almost the only industry. A large unskilled labour pool finds few jobs to do. Addiction to drugs is common, and substance abuse is accepted and even routine. Bars are as ubiquitous as the smell of *pate*, a favourite local snack of fried dough stuffed with meat.

Shutting an open back door

Perhaps most important is the absence of a sense of community within and between government agencies and among people at large. The population of the Virgin Islands comes from all over the world, but particularly from other Caribbean islands; the different groups remain unassimilated and self-contained, with their own meeting places and their own social circles. On St John, West Indians hang out at Mooies bar, Cap's Place is almost exclusively for Dominicans, and St Lucians prefer Tony's mobile food van (which hasn't been mobile for a decade). There is very little mixing and no unifying force.

At a minimum, the federal government and the Department of Homeland Security need dramatically to increase the federal police presence in the islands, including border-patrol officers equipped with boats and helicopters. Each island also needs more money to bolster its own emergency services, to protect its water and power systems, and especially to improve the training and awareness of the police. More honest government, a more diverse economy and efforts to achieve a more united community would not go amiss either.

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Article calling V.I. ripe for terrorism draws blistering response

By AESHA DUVAL

Thursday, September 7th 2006

ST. CROIX - Residents and V.I. government officials spoke out strongly against an article published in British magazine *The Economist* that sharply criticized the territory's preparedness for a terrorist attack.

The article, titled "America's Underbelly," appeared in the Sept. 2-8 edition of the magazine, which has a circulation of more than 1 million readers in Great Britain, parts of Europe and the United States. The article also appeared in the Sept. 2 edition of *The Hamilton Spectator*, a Canadian newspaper.

The *Economist* headline describes the territory as being "woefully unprepared for a terrorist attack," and the piece goes on to say that the Virgin Islands is a prime target for terrorists because of government corruption, unprotected borders, the territory's weak infrastructure and poorly trained and inadequately staffed police, fire, paramedic and rescue services.

It stressed the need for Border Patrol officers and an increased presence of federal law officers.

The article also states that the security issues in the territory are compounded by a host of social ills including "racism, poverty, stark and increasing economic disparity and poor education."

"Addiction to drugs is common, and substance abuse is accepted and even routine," the article states.

It goes on to say that St. Thomas and St. John lack a sense of community and that the various cultures and groups from neighboring islands are "unassimilated and self-contained, with their own meeting places and their own social circles."

The article makes no mention of St. Croix.

While a byline does not appear with the article, it was written by Martin Alperen, a former St. John resident and former V.I. assistant attorney general in St. Thomas who now lives in Colorado Springs, Colo. Alperen said the article is based on research he

gathered for his thesis project on homeland security strategies, terrorism and natural disaster preparedness for the Virgin Islands.

He lived in the territory for more than seven years and was the former president of St. John Rescue.

In March, Alperen obtained a master's degree in homeland security and defense from a U.S. Department of Homeland Security-sponsored program at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. He started his research in 2004 and took an unpaid leave of absence from his job last year to focus full time on his thesis.

He said wrote the article to raise awareness about the security issues facing the territory and to create a dialogue on how best to resolve them.

"It's a small enough place that it can be dealt with better than they are right now," Alperen said Wednesday. "I would like people to talk about these things."

That dialogue already is taking place, government officials argued Wednesday, and most of the security issues raised in the article already have been addressed or plans are in the works to address them.

V.I. Homeland Security Director Mel Vanterpool called the article "disparaging" and "ridiculous."

"It makes it look like we are doing nothing to protect ourselves, and he couldn't be more wrong," Vanterpool said. "We are as secure as we can be at this time. No one ever in the world is safe from terrorism."

The article describes a scenario in which seaplanes that fly between St. Thomas and St. Croix could be used by terrorists to crash into cruise ships and ferries and that there is no passenger screening.

Vanterpool said that the agency already has met with Seaborne Airlines and the airline now implements random security checks on passengers and that the seaplanes no longer fly over the ships in the harbor.

He said the agency is working to obtain a fire boat, which would provide the ability to fight fires at sea. The article pointed out that emergency responders have no means of fighting a blaze out in the waters.

He said first responders - firefighters, police, paramedics, search and rescue personnel and hazardous materials specialists - receive constant training.

Vanterpool said the issues raised are not new to his agency or the government, nor are they unique to the Virgin Islands. He said having enough federal funding always has been an issue.

"It's not like we are sitting here and waiting for something to happen," he said. "We are proactive and we take a stand on prevention."

Government House spokesman James O'Bryan Jr. said the territory has made some great strides to train personnel and update equipment since the Sept. 11 attacks.

"We have exhausted the required local spending," O'Bryan said. "To do more would require the investment of a significant amount of money."

O'Bryan said the article unfairly slams the Virgin Islands, while many other jurisdictions face similar problems.

"I think we have nothing to be apologetic about," he said. "We have our good issues and our bad ones, but we still are very much further ahead in terms of safety than some parts of the world."

U.S. Delegate to Congress Donna Christensen, who has been the most vocal on the need for border protection in the territory, said the article is over-reaching and exaggerates the problems in the Virgin Islands.

"We have some problems and there is grain of truth in some of it, but it takes a very negative slant," Christensen said.

She said a bill is working its way through the Senate that calls for more Border Patrol agents in the territory.

As for the social ills and government corruption mentioned in the article, Christensen said that while those issues do exist, they too are grossly exaggerated.

V.I. police spokesman Sgt. Thomas Hannah said on Wednesday the department has no comment in response to the statements made in the article.

V.I. Tourism Marketing Director Steven Bornn said the article puts the territory in a damaging light, but it was too soon to tell if the tourism economy would be adversely affected.

"As a community we are ever mindful of what we sell," Bornn said. "We all have to think about what we say, how we say it and to whom we say it. Word of mouth is a very strong and powerful means of communication."

Alperen said the article was sent to 20 publications and it included excerpts from his 200-page thesis and attribution from sources for much of the information. He later found out The Economist does not carry bylines and that the sourcing had been edited out.

Alperen said the version that appears in magazine also was edited heavily, but he still stands by his story.

"My whole objective was to establish a dialogue that will foster a positive change," Alperen said. "It may be disparaging, but I did it because I love the Virgin Islands."