

St Helena Government expresses deep dismay at postponement of "vital" airport decision

The Council of Ministers, in a meeting held yesterday, expressed deep dismay at the postponement of a decision on the proposed airport project.

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To: Rt. Honourable Douglas Alexander MP Secretary of State for International Development

We are disappointed to hear that the decision to postpone the airport project has been made. This is a significant decision and we are disappointed that it has been postponed.

We understand that the decision was made by the Council of Ministers.

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Plans to fly thousands of tourists to St Helena have been put on hold

In Jamestown's 18th century castle, overlooking the churning South Atlantic, the governor of St Helena spoke of a "deep, smouldering anger" among the island's isolated population. Eric Benjamin, a councillor, who had just returned from a carol concert in St Paul's cathedral, described it as "a lousy Christmas present".

After seven years' detailed planning for a £100m airport and the promise of economic self-sufficiency, the remote British dependency was yesterday consumed with resentment about a sudden freeze imposed on its long-cherished project. Plans to fly in thousands of tourists, generate sustainable incomes and link the territory to the outside world, have become the latest victim of the global credit crunch.

The government announcement at Westminster was slipped out in a written parliamentary statement late Monday afternoon. The Department for International Development (DfID) and the Treasury were "in continuing discussions about issues of concern regarding access to St Helena", the secretary of state, Douglas Alexander, revealed. "As a result, there will be a pause in negotiations over the St Helena airport contract." Many of the 4,000 residents of the 47-sq-mile volcanic outcrop believe "pause" means "cancelled". The governor, Andrew Gurr, said he had been told that the delay was due to "international financial unrest. Most of the people are very upset. Guttled was one word used. They feel very let down. All our planning and all our thinking has been towards the airport for some time. The cost of [travel] by sea is more expensive. It will almost be back to square one if we don't go ahead with the Italian contractor [Impregilo]. This will cost more for the British taxpayer if we don't have the airport."

St Helena was the last home of emperor Napoleon. During the 19th century, it was a Royal Navy base for operations against slave traders. The bodies of 10,000 slaves, who had died before they could be liberated, are buried on the island. St Helena has grown accustomed to being let down, Gurr added. The creation of the Suez canal diverted much of the seaborne trade 150 years ago. Over the past decade the population has dropped by almost a third as younger people have emigrated to the Falklands or Ascension island where wages are significantly higher.

The only way of reaching St Helena by a regular service is aboard the ageing RMS St Helena. The ship leaves Portland, Dorset, twice a year and calls at other remote Atlantic territories and at Capetown. There is no jetty and sometimes cruise ships which anchor off Jamestown cannot land their passengers.

"This decision is devastating," said Benjamin. "It is keeping the island in limbo." It has been made at a time when the UK government is submitting claims to the UN for extending control of the seabed around many of its Atlantic dependencies. A DfID spokesman yesterday denied that the project has been cancelled: "There are a number of financial and economic questions to discuss, taking account of the changed economic climate."

Taken from 'The Guardian', Wed 10 Dec. '08