BVI recovers after hurricanes

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The BVI International Arbitration Centre surrounded by the devastation of Irma and Maria

The British Virgin Islands have been spared the full force of Hurricane Maria, the second category 5 hurricane to hit the Caribbean in two weeks, and are now focusing on humanitarian aid and reconstruction - with the arbitration centre providing a hub for disaster relief efforts.

After the widespread damage inflicted by Hurricane Irma, there was fear that Maria would destroy what infrastructure and buildings had survived as well as causing further danger and suffering to the people of BVI, who were already facing food and water shortages.

However, Francois Lassalle, the CEO of the BVI International Arbitration Centre who experienced both hurricanes, says Maria turned out to be "quite a smooth ride compared to Irma" as the eye passed south of the islands.

"We got winds of 60 miles per hour and gusts of 80 miles per hour with some rain but nothing compared to what we feared," he tells GAR. "Limited flooding and mudslides have caused some additional damage to property across the island."

No deaths have been linked to Hurricane Maria and Lassalle says it only interrupted distribution of food and water for a day. "The country is still in a state of emergency, not recovery, but I am hopeful that in a week or so we will be able to start thinking about what comes next," he says.
Having withstood Irma with just a few cracked windows, the recently built arbitration centre in Tortola (the BVI's most populated island) sustained no further damage during Maria and even maintained internet connectivity during the hurricane. It was here that Lassalle decided to "batten down" rather than risk being stuck at home for days because of fallen trees blocking the roads, as he was following Irma.

In the days that followed that first hurricane, the governor of the BVI Augustus Javert and civil servants moved into the arbitration centre after the government offices were destroyed. Now, the centre has become a "national security space", Lassalle says - occupied by the BVI's premier Orlando Smith, ministers and the National Emergency Response Centre, along with quantities of food, water and supplies ready to be dispatched to shelters.

The centre is also the headquarters for VirginUnite, the charitable arm of the Virgin Group founded by billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson (whose own private island in the BVI, Necker, sustained significant damage during Irma). VirginUnite is now coordinating relief efforts by a number of charities.

Other temporary occupants of the centre include the heads of the civil registry and passport office and members of the BVI judiciary.

Despite the influx of people, Lassalle says he has retained a few rooms for the use of the arbitration centre, which has yet to administer any cases but has some work as an appointing authority. The chair of the centre's board, John Beechey, is based in London and Hong Kong and was not in the BVI when the hurricanes struck. Nor was registrar Joao Vilhena Valerio, who splits his time between Hong Kong, The Hague and Lisbon.

As for the BVI's other legal infrastructure, the commercial division of the High Court of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, headed by Barry Leon, has been temporarily relocated to Castries in St Lucia because of damage and flooding to its premises. It will resume sitting after the summer recess on 25 September, as planned.

With regard to the financial services industry, Lorna Smith, executive director of BVI Finance, has put out several statements reassuring clients that activity has resumed.

"With many businesses activating their business continuity plans, a significant level of services and operations have continued either on island or via international networks," she said on 18 September (before Maria).
"Substantive activity that has already resumed in the territory includes new companies being incorporated."

The company registry and its online portal, VIRGIN, were operating again within three days of Irma, she noted.

Smith also provided reassurance that "all controls and safeguards are in place with regards to data privacy and security" and said that employees of private sector firms who were relocated post-Irma would be back.

Given the importance of the BVI's business and financial services (the country has facilitated over US$1.5 trillion of investment globally) she said there is no doubt that there will be a full return to business.

In a further statement after Maria, Smith said the "full impact" of the second hurricane was "still emerging" but disruption to business and financial services was "minimal". Once again, she promised a swift "return to normalcy," with the help of businesses and the UK government.

But for the many BVI citizens outside the financial services industry getting back to business is currently impossible. Lassalle says: "All the small shops are gone, so in addition to losing their homes and possessions, many have been left without a source of income. Hairdressers, nail salons and clothing and electronic stores have been wiped out."

"We have to work out how to recreate the micro-economy and give these people jobs and premises in which to operate, even if in temporary trailer business parks to start with."

The photos in this article were taken by Francois Lassalle.