

St. Eustatius, October 9, 2021.

Dear Chairman and Members of the Kingdom Relations Committee,

In reference to an article in DossierKoninkrijksrelaties.nl (October 8, 2021, "Knops won't burn his fingers on unrest about excavations on St. Eustatius"¹ we take note of the reaction of the island government. Without going into the content right now, I note that our written questions are not addressed by the Island Government and because we for that reason extend our correspondence to your Committee as well as to the National Ombudsman, we believe, letters from us are 'suddenly' confirmed: all of a sudden on September 9, 2021, an acknowledgement of receipt is given of our letters of July 13, 15, 18, 1 and 15, 2021. In our opinion, our letters were respectfully written and based on facts. Without subsequently elaborating on this, the Government Commissioner en passant accuses us of making "suspicions". This tone of voice was not easily understood by us - understandably so.

It is reported to you that archaeological research was initiated in the spring of 2021 because excavation work for sand extraction for various road projects had given rise to it. To start with the sand extraction: sand can be extracted at many places on the island so why exactly this spot on the airport grounds should be used is something for which there is no logic at all. This is true, of course, because the reason must be sought in an earlier SECAR study at that location, namely in the fall of 2020 (a year earlier) about which a report was delivered on November 30, 2020². Pages 46 and 47 of this report speak of possibly one of the largest burial sites of African slaves in the Caribbean. In short, at the very least, I see that you are being incompletely informed (this, in our opinion, not insignificant information is dismissed in the letter with "based on preliminary research...").

And that this preliminary history is relevant is also evident from the factual record which, although known to us, was also confirmed by the Government Commissioner in her letter of September 9, 2021 (particularly in the factual record attached to this letter). The government commissioner has included the facts - to her credit - showing the dubious construction by which the wife of Mr. Van Rij receives 12,000 US dollars through SECAR and the company 3C after the decision of the current government commissioner, just two days after Mr. Van Rij had silently withdrawn from the office of government commissioner. Legally, I am sure, everything is within limits, but morally, of course, it is extremely reprehensible.

¹ <https://dossierkoninkrijksrelaties.nl/2021/10/08/knops-brandt-vingers-niet-aan-onrust-over-opgravingen-op-sint-eustatius/>

² <https://secar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Van-Keulen-et-al.-2020-An-Archaeological-Desk-Based-Assessment-and-Field-Investigations-for-the-F.D.-Roosevelt-Airport-on-St-Eustatius-Caribbean-Netherlands.pdf>

The explanation, tour and townhall meeting followed after the island government and SECAR could no longer continue with their "secret" mission; after all, rumors were spreading on the island about what was actually going on. The obviousness of being open about this now is in reality far from obvious. After all, the excavation project had already begun about a year before. Only on June 21, 2021, was a so-called townhall meeting organized. Incidentally, that was a meeting that was tightly directed so that no "unpleasant" discussion for the island government would follow (about - for example - *why* to break open a slave cemetery of ancestors of the current population). Only technical questions were allowed and only one question per person. Once a discussion did threaten to develop, it was immediately quashed by and on behalf of the government commissioner. The outraged Statian then left the room. *Note: According to our information, it is customary in the world of archaeology to sound out the opinion of the relatives or the population - in view of the potential sensitivities - beforehand, after which it can still be decided - in the event of an investigation - to carry out an in situ or an ex situ investigation. The report of 30 November 2020 only mentions an ex situ investigation. So again: deliberate limitation of information. Broad consultation did not take place at all.*

The letter also mentions an *independent* commission to be appointed, the SHRC. This commission was established by the government commissioner and, without wishing to detract in any way from the expertise of its members, it is very much the proverbial butcher inspecting his own meat, or if you like: "we of WC-eend, advise WC-eend". In other words, there is no independence at all. And this added to the fact that no consultation with the local population took place or is planned as well as the fact that from this committee no interim findings were allowed to be communicated (or rather: no communication at all was allowed about the project with others outside the committee) makes that this is a perfectly orchestrated demonstration of 'independence' of which the credibility is close to absolute zero. The letter from or on behalf of the government commissioner obviously does not inform you of this at all. With regard to this aspect, we note that it shows a certain audacity (or: misplaced arrogance) when the letter says "*.... The choice was made to guarantee the independent character of the research*".

The letter to you (made public via Koninkrijksrelaties.nl) is the first time we have heard about spearheads and phasing of the investigation. As a group of 'concerned Statians' we have often insisted on a plan (which apparently is not there, otherwise the commission would not have to advise on this) regarding this for the population sensitive matter. That the population feels passed over and not respected is - it seems to us - obvious to the reader.

In our letter of July 13, 2021, we put this last observation in a context: to date (since the intervention of February 2018) no initiative has been shown to really consult with the population. And since there is again an Island Council, also not in a real and serious consultation with this Island Council. Where the intervention at the time was achieved with a law "Task neglect", we would rather call the current administration "Administrative contempt" (where the responsibility for the administration unequivocally lies with the Government, for this the State Secretary of the Interior and Kingdom Relations). And since, in our opinion, no "transfer of power" has taken place yet, the way this State Secretary acts - i.c. *The archaeological excavations are the responsibility of the Government Commissioner of the Public Entity of St. Eustatius* - can be called particularly cowardly. Taking responsibility is not always easy, but if you don't take it, you will be exposed to the public. This State Secretary will have calculated this risk: electorally St. Eustatius is not that important.

Noting that all our correspondence, both incoming and outgoing, can be found on the website <https://excav.jhtm.nl> (in both English and Dutch: click on the little flag at the top right), we sign with high esteem,
together with and on behalf of a group of concerned Statians,

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Cc: National Ombudsman