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PREPARING OUR TOURISM SECTOR FOR RAPID RECOVERY

Introduction

After more than fifteen months of disruption to life as we know it in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we are beginning to see signs that things are about to bounce back in a big way. The disruptions have occurred across the board as the pandemic wreaked havoc on our health system, the economy, our social systems as well as security. Citizens looked on helplessly as the planes and cruise ships stopped coming rendering hotels and guests houses empty, putting hundreds of workers out of jobs. Taxi operators, craft vendors, tour operators, water taxi operators, farmers and many other self-employed individuals whose business depended on the tourist's dollar to remain sustainable were badly hit. Schools encountered repeated disruptions of face to face learning creating serious challenges for the stakeholders who had to employ novel methods to minimise the negative impacts of the disruptions. The government responded quickly providing additional resources for the health sector, to improve its capacity through additional personnel, and investment in a new isolation facility to respond to the demands of the virus on the existing health services. The response of the government in managing the Covid-19 pandemic, when considered that there were no restrictive measures of curfew, lockdown or state of emergency, proved to be highly successful in preventing serious illness and keep in the number of deaths very low. All the while, the government kept working, constant consultation with stakeholders in the various industries to ensure that this country is prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that would become available once the world was ready to open up. Even with the recent eruption of the La Soufriere volcano, that presents an additional challenge, the government has been focused on addressing the needs of those affected, managing the economy, working with partners making plans to put this country in a position to benefit from the increased economic activity expected as the world opens up for business.

The Tourism Sector is Rapidly Developing

A few weeks ago, Sandals Resorts held a job fair here in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and hundreds of individuals attended to get information as well as to register for the company's job placement program. Through this program, Sandals International intends to train hundreds of Vincentians on location at their resorts for them to come back and be part of the team here on mainland Saint Vincent at the soon to be constructed Beaches Resort. The pandemic has delayed the start of works on the local hotel project that will see hundreds of tradesmen employed during the construction phase and hundreds more once the resort is operational. Minister of Finance, Hon Camillo Gonsalves and Minister of Tourism, Hon Carlos James remain very involved in the process, negotiating and working with the investor to ensure that things go as plan towards having the Beaches Resort here very soon. Other tourism projects have continued during the slow period of the pandemic and are progressing and will be ready to open their doors very soon, while those that are already operational have used the opportunity to undertake improvements and renovations in preparation for the expected influx on visitors to this island. The government recognised that preparation is key and used every opportunity to work with investors through agencies such as the SVG Tourism Authority and Invest SVG to ensure that the right environment is created to facilitate growth in the tourism sector. The negotiations that resulted in a planned inaugural flight of Virgin Atlantic, direct from the UK to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Argyle International Airport, are all part of the vision of the ULP government for this country's tourism sector. The unfortunate delay of this flight to later this year, provides additional time that should be used by all stakeholders to ensure maximum preparation for that time. The opportunities this direct flight would present to the tourism sector and the economy generally are limitless.

In the meanwhile, construction continues at the Royal Mill in Ratho Mill and other projects with the much-anticipated Holiday Inn express at Diamond and the Marriot Hotel in Mt. Wynne as government ventures also in the early stage of their development. The work has never stopped and will only increase in pace as the global environment that has restricted much of the flow of goods and services that are integral to economic activity are eased. The vision, leadership and hard work of this government have been evident during these challenging times in managing the various sectors of the country's economy, even as we tackle the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic and the La Soufriere eruption.

Conclusion

Comrade Ralph has always said “Governance is not an arm of the entertainment industry, it is serious business for serious people”, and this has been very evident by the way the ULP administration has carried out its work of managing the country over the last 15 months. Those involved in the politics of obstruction and distraction have had little success as Vincentians are generally satisfied and some even amazed at the way the government has gone about the business of this country during these very challenging times. The late Parnel R Campbell QC, summed it up quite correctly when he stated “I can sleep comfortably at nights, in the knowledge that Ralph Gonsalves is the head of government of this country”. His words ring true even today and represent the sentiments of many right thinking and objective Vincentians at home or abroad, regardless of their politics. The work is however not done and we must continue to prepare the tourism sector to be ready for when the tourists start traveling in their numbers again. As we prepare, we must be very mindful of the health requirements going forward from travellers who demand minimum health standards from those offering services. Covid-19 is still very present which makes regular testing and vaccination of those directly involved in the sector a very important part of our preparation as a country. Let’s do this for our tourism sector, for our economy, for our country.