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Virgin Islands Government Official Sentenced in \$1.4 Million Bribery and Kickback Scheme

WASHINGTON – The former director of permits for the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) was sentenced today to 14 months in prison for his role in a \$1.4 million bribery and kickback scheme, Acting Assistant Attorney General Matthew Friedrich of the Criminal Division and Acting U.S. Attorney Paul A. Murphy of the District of the Virgin Islands announced.

U.S. District Chief Judge Curtis V. Gomez also ordered Brent E. Blyden, 46, to pay \$125,755 in restitution as well as a personal money judgment in the amount of \$ 20,000, and sentenced Blyden to serve three years of supervised release following his release from prison. In addition, Judge Gomez banned Blyden from federal and local government employment for five years.

Blyden pleaded guilty on Aug. 21, 2007, to a one-count criminal information charging him with conspiracy to obstruct justice, stemming from his efforts to conceal from investigators and a grand jury his and others' participation in the \$1.4 million bribery and kickback scheme. According to court documents, beginning in early 2000, high-ranking officials within the Virgin Islands government and others formed a fictitious business called Elite Technical Services (Elite), and then used it and other companies to seek and be awarded at least seven government contracts valued at approximately \$1.4 million. Although little or no actual work was performed on the contracts, which were awarded by the DPNR and the Department of Property and Procurement (DP&P) on behalf of DPNR and the Virgin Islands Fire Service, payments totaling more than \$1.1 million were made to Elite and the other companies. According to court documents, once the contract proceeds were paid to Elite and the other companies, members of the corrupt scheme paid bribes and kickbacks totaling between \$300,000 and \$350,000 to at least four other territorial government officials, including Blyden.

In late 2004 and continuing through June 2005, when the bribery and kickback scheme became the subject of investigation, Blyden and other participants in the bribery and kickback scheme concocted and engaged in a second illicit scheme designed to obstruct justice. In pleading guilty, Blyden admitted to: participating in an effort to create backdated false documents designed to cover up the fact that certain contract work was never performed; creating false documents purporting to memorialize a DPNR internal investigation into Elite and the government contracts awarded to the fictitious business; and making materially false statements to federal and local law enforcement officials investigating the bribery and kickback scheme.

To date, six individuals, including four additional U.S. Virgin Islands government officials, have either pleaded guilty to, or have been convicted at trial of, felony charges as a result of this investigation. Following a three-week jury trial, former DPNR Commissioner Dean C. Plaskett and former DP&P Commissioner Marc A. Biggs were convicted of violating the federal program bribery statute and obstruction of justice. Plaskett and Biggs were sentenced on Aug. 14, 2008, to nine and seven years in prison, respectively. Plaskett and Biggs also were ordered to

pay personal money judgments in the approximate amounts of \$1.1 million and \$1 million, respectively. DPNR Director of the Division of Environmental Protection Hollis L. Griffin, former Virgin Islands Fire Service employee Earl E. Brewley and Atlanta businessman Esmond J. Modeste pleaded guilty to conspiring to violate the federal program bribery statute, honest services mail fraud and structuring currency transactions to further the underlying bribery and kickback scheme. Griffin was sentenced on May 3, 2007, to four years in prison. Modeste and Brewley were sentenced on May 16, 2007, to 30 months and 21 months in prison, respectively. Griffin, Modeste and Brewley also were ordered to pay restitution of approximately \$1.1 million.

The case is being prosecuted by Trial Attorneys Armando O. Bonilla, Michael Ferrara and Peter M. Koski of the Criminal Division's Public Integrity Section, headed by Chief William M. Welch II, in coordination with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of the Virgin Islands. Criminal Division Trial Attorney John P. Pearson participated in the investigation of this matter. The matter continues to be investigated by a task force comprised of the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of the Inspector General. The Virgin Islands Office of the Inspector General also assisted in the investigation and prosecution.

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