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EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

January 14, 2013

RESPONSE TO ARTICLE
"TOBAGO UNDERWATER HERITAGE THREATENED"

The Editor,

On January 13, 2013 an article headlined "Tobago Underwater heritage threatened" outlined Ms. Claire Broadbridge's concerns about the Scarborough Harbour Archeology Project in Tobago. The article was misleading, and I would like to take a few paragraphs here to address some of the issues raised.

The Embassy is a stakeholder in this project, so we have been following it closely. It is important to reiterate that all items recovered in this project will remain the property of Trinidad and Tobago. As in, all of the items. The lead researcher in the project, Dr. Kroum N Batchvarov, Assistant Professor of Marine Archaeology of the University Connecticut, has been clear from the beginning that this project will promote academic understanding of the patrimony of Trinidad and Tobago.

Researchers from the University of Connecticut received approval from the THA in May 2012 to proceed with rescue excavation, conservation, preservation and assistance with long-term curation work on artifacts found on sunken ships in the Scarborough Harbor.

These researchers will work with a team to locate, map, assess, document and recover threatened material in the harbor, using highly experienced staff and archeologists. The team plans to create a purpose-built conservation facility in Tobago to ensure that the artifacts can be catalogued and maintained. Additionally, a global database will be created for future study and information sharing, placing Tobago at the forefront of a scientific field which is under-staffed in the Caribbean region. All artifacts will be treated using the best scientific methods while under the supervision of trained nautical archaeologists, historians and curators with over 70 years of experience in the field between them.

The researchers and archaeological team value and understand the importance of including local expertise in any project involving the examination of their history and culture. They included Trinbagonian individuals and organizations throughout their planning and will continue to do so upon the commencement of the rescue excavation process for these artifacts.

The team will include local divers who participated in the initial project and students from a number of different disciplines in both UTT and UWI who will get hands-on knowledge and training in all aspects of the project.

This project aims at increased capacity-building so that Trinbagonians can continue to increase the number of cultural conservation and archaeological projects in both islands.

This project should leave a long-lasting positive imprint on Tobago. The researchers would like to see the excavated pieces become an attraction as part of the Museum at Fort George. As mentioned in Ms. Broadbridge's letter, similar projects have seen a large interest from the public and brought many benefits to the areas around the excavation sites. An exhibit could generate tourist revenue and raise awareness of the historical importance and relevance of the site to the nation of Trinidad and Tobago.

The focus for 2013 will be to remove the most vulnerable cultural material from harm's way. Increased traffic in Scarborough Harbour has placed the site at risk as ships disturb the seabed where the ships are buried. All conservation activities and artifacts will be kept in Tobago as the aim is to use proper scientific methods to ensure their longevity.

I believe this is an important project to preserve the endangered heritage of Tobago and would be happy to facilitate discussion between Ms. Broadbridge and Professor Batchvarov to ensure that all her concerns are addressed.

Sincerely,

Thomas Smitham
Chargé D'Affaires
Embassy of the United States of America