

St. Eustatius, September 5, 2021.

Dear Ombudsman of the Netherlands,

In principle, you can take action when parties have a conflict with the government. In a certain respect, this is a borderline case: the local government simply turns a deaf ear to our appeals. They are not the only ones, by the way: also the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (under ministerial responsibility of the Minister of OCW) does not respond in any way to our calls. We have written seven times to the National Service and the first substantive response from them has yet to come. For that matter, we hear as good as nothing from the local island administration as well. After our first letter there was a notification of receipt. In terms of content, things have gone completely quiet since then.

What is it about? It's about quietly clearing graves of ancestors of Statians: slaves in the era of the plantations. The current airport of St. Eustatius is one such location. Human remains are found and without any consultation with the population or with a representation of the population (i.e. the Island Council) the Board of the Public Entity grants an investigation assignment to SECAR to do research. The objection focuses on the lack of consultation with the population about what is actually going on. And once the rumors turn out to be true and an objection follows, the local government maintains a self-appointed radio silence whose motto seems to be "*just don't react, it will all blow over and we'll carry on*".

Eventually a townhall meeting was organized by the Public Entity of St. Eustatius, jointly with St. Eustatius Archaeological Research, SECAR. It was told with great pride that the site is possibly one of the largest slave burial sites in the Caribbean. There was talk of 69 excavated human remains. The numbers, by the way, vary by media report. The find turns out to be so important that an NOS cameraman and a journalist were sent to St. Eustatius for reporting.

Oh yes, in order to calm things down the local government has decided to set up an independent steering committee (note: the government is installing an *independent* steering committee, whose members it has also appointed itself; by definition, of course, an impossible thing to do!). And that group is not allowed to come out with any message until a final report is made. *This is transparency in its Statian way.*

Let me just try to put some structure into this letter:

- it begins in the spring of 2020 with archaeological research of a plot of land located in an area where there used to be a plantation. It quickly became apparent that this was a large slave burial

site; possibly one of the largest in the Caribbean. It was reported to the government commissioners at the time;

- after the hurricane season, excavations were started in the spring of 2021; in the meantime, no information has been provided to the residents of St Eustatius; no licenses or certifications have been applied for, no plan of action is being drawn up for the excavation, the research and the preservation of the remains during and after the research; Nor does it appear that there is any urgency to proceed to the breach of grave rest and excavation; after all, there is no change in the zoning plan or plan to develop the area in question; in short, work is started without any necessity and without having informed the population in any way about the discovery of the graves of their ancestors;
- in May 2021, a few reports appear in daily newspapers and the NOS news programme pays attention to the excavations; still no consultation with the Stian population has taken place, while the unrest is growing;
- only on Monday, June 21, 2021, a townhall meeting is organized in order to give the appearance that the population is involved; most of the reserved time is taken up by three presentations by SECAR; furthermore, hardly any questions may be asked or responded to by others; avoidance is made of creating a situation that could lead to a discussion undesirable to the government; thus, only short technical questions;
- then protests are made and it seems as if they are being heeded but on closer inspection this is just an appearance: they are simply stopped because of the impending hurricane season;
- we continue to correspond in writing about this but the local government no longer gives any response;
- pieces appear in the newspaper but - it is suspected that the local government has a hand in this - the tone is aimed at a division between the protesting groups: as if the local government is not to blame, in any case the attention is diverted from the seriously failing government;
- in the margin it is also visible that the company of the wife of the now retired government commissioner (Mr. Van Rij) obtains a certain budget for PR-activities about the excavations; decision-making about this by the current government commissioner is no longer visible on the government website.

Of course, I also follow the Dutch news, but in the context of the cabinet formation other games become visible that a decent person would be ashamed of (including the debacle surrounding the evacuation of refugees from Afghanistan). A report about "our" air connections just stays two years in a bottom drawer at the ministry of which the responsible minister (Ms. Van Nieuwenhuizen-Wijbenga) quickly brings her own sheep on dry land and leaves the sinking ship of the cabinet; the Volkskrant

(Friday, September 3, 2021, page 31) describes a CV of her which nobody will really be proud of). In her view, the Caribbean Netherlands is simply a "far from my bed show". It is not very surprising that Statians view the relationship with the European Netherlands despondently and without much confidence. *And yet that is the relationship with which we will have to realize the future together!*

Then we come to you, dear Ombudsman. We would like to see you recognize our problem and ask the Government Commissioners for clarification, whether or not through the intervention of those responsible in the Cabinet. In our opinion, the problem simply amounts to a vulgar example of arrogant behavior. The arrogance of the power that will determine what should happen, but decent communication about it: ho!

May we ask you to consult with the Government Commissioners and the Secretary of State of BZK in the very near future and lead them to the conclusion that the disrespectful excavations will be stopped and that the human remains already excavated will be (re)buried in a dignified manner and that a detailed plan will be presented to the population, including an explanation of the possibilities, which will certainly include the preservation of the current situation. It is up to the residents of St Eustatius what to do with the burial place of the ancestors.

Thank you in advance for your intervention.

Kind regards, also on behalf of and with a Group of Concerned Statians,

J.H.T. (Jan) Meijer MSc MBA.

Cc Chairman and members of the Committees KR and OCW (=> the Cultural Heritage Board)
(Deputy) Government Commissioner on St. Eustatius
Members of the Island Council of St. Eustatius
National Institute Dutch Slavery History and Heritage

- App-ix
1. We demand a halt to the excavations! (July 13, 2021)
 2. We demand a transparent and ethically sound research! (August 1, 2021)
 3. Please respond to our call of August 1, 2021 (August 15, 2021)

All of this information (and more) can be found at <https://excav.jhtm.nl>