Background

During the Central Committee meeting, dated October 19th, 2017, Commissioner Zagers addressed the Central Committee and the general public on behalf of the Executive Council of Saba. This was the first public Central Committee meeting since the passing of hurricanes Irma and Maria. Below is the written update as provided by Commissioner Zagers during this Central Committee Meeting.

Introduction

This Central Committee Meeting has provided a good platform to not only give general updates to the members of the Central Committee but also to the community at large which deserves to hear in more detail what has transpired since we were first struck by Hurricane Irma on September 6th. Before this Central Committee meeting, the Executive Council has met with the members of the Island Council on two separate occasions, namely on September 15th and September 29th. These were both informal, closed door, meetings, where the executive council updated the Island Council on what had been happening since the passing of the hurricanes. In addition to this, the community was informed in many different ways. Before, during and directly after all hurricanes hit, the Governor issued several voice updates, our GIS officer was available 24/7 as our frontline answering questions and addressing concerns within our community, our economic recovery team met with the entire private business community and set-up a platform on September 11th, September 15th, and September 29th, two newsletters
have been produced and daily updates through multiple press releases were circulated updating our community on the steps taken during the recovery and to report on the progress we made.

**Prepare, Respond, Recover**

On September 4th the Executive Council travelled back from meetings with the Ministries in The Hague and actually Commissioner Wilson and I arrived on Saba on the 5th. The following day, on September 6th, hurricane Irma hit Saba. On September 7th, the day after Irma, hurricane Jose was projected to hit on September 9th or 10th, which thankfully eventually diverted. Immediately afterwards, hurricane Irma came into view. On September 19th, Maria started to impact Saba. Thus, since September 6th, the Executive Council has operated under very unconventional conditions. Arriving from Holland, instantly having to prepare, respond, recover from a major category 5 hurricane, to only have to prepare, respond again for Jose that same week and to finally have to prepare, respond and recover from hurricane Maria the week after, has been quite the challenge. There are no examples, case studies or text book solutions that can be referred to that would offer advice to have guided our council.

**The Saba Speed on full display**

During these extreme and unique circumstances, the government had to act fast and most importantly govern responsibly. In many circumstances, under the conditions we were confronted with, decisions were taken swift in order to restore normalcy within our community.
while trying to safeguard our already fragile economy. In the Hague, Saba’s ability to react, adapt and move to recovery mode so swiftly, especially during these extreme circumstances, has been referred to as the “Saba Speed”.

This so called “Saba Speed” is something that The Hague is obviously not used to as the relief that Saba needs for a full recovery is taking much longer than any of us expected. Although disappointed, we must however realize that the current council of ministers is only functioning as a caretaker government and a new coalition government is expected to be finalized within a matter of days.

Within hours after the passing of hurricane Irma, the “Saba Speed” and the resilience of the Saban community was on full display. With the Executive Council, policy workers, department heads, the fire department, police, marines, the hospital, the private sector and all our Saba people, a major undertaking was started to respond and recover as soon as possible from an almost direct impact from a historical category 5 hurricane Irma.

All hands on deck
Being faced with extreme damage in some areas, all efforts to clear roads and assist families which had lost their roof had to start immediately. It was important to have ‘all hands on deck’, all the more because one day after Irma hurricane Jose was projected to hit us. There were only 3 days between Irma and Jose to recover from Irma and prepare the island for Jose.

After the threat of Jose subsided on September 10th, hurricane Maria appeared on the radar to hit Saba around September 19th. The alarming need for preparatory works that hurricane Jose jumpstarted was now pushed through for another week with the imminent arrival of Maria.
Island wide, works had to intensify to clear our island of debris and cover and secure all damaged houses and public structures so that we would be ready, as much as possible, to take another hit of what was initially predicted as a direct impact of another severe category 5 hurricane.

**Road to recovery**

Behind the scenes a lot has transpired since the passing of the hurricanes. From the start there was regular contact with the relevant ministries and in some cases Ministers in the Netherlands. With teams on Saba and in the Netherlands actively working, the process of damage assessment and reporting started. Detailed assessments have been prepared and submitted to the Netherlands after the passing of each hurricane and again more recently, after the torrential rains over the weekend.

Sitting idle and waiting for external expertise to come to Saba to help with the assessments was not an option for the Executive Council. While the overall damage assessments were being made, the Planning Bureau immediately started making calculations for what was needed to repair the homes and other damaged structures on the island. Knowing that there was significant damage on many of our sister islands, it was of utmost importance to place our orders for building supplies before there were none available to order. On September 13th the first order of building supplies was placed and has since been delivered to Saba. Fortunately this order was placed before hurricane Maria hit, as probably we would not have been able to get these supplies as fast as we got them now, seeing the devastation hurricane Maria caused in Puerto Rico.
On September 17th, the Executive Council officially presented its first assessment for the damages caused by hurricane Irma to the Netherlands. This assessment, which was produced locally, contains input from various stakeholders from both the public and private sector. Some of the highlights mentioned in this assessment include:

- Repairs and reconstruction to homes and other buildings;
- Temporary reduction of costs for water supply;
- Temporary reduction of costs for electricity;
- Support for boat owners who had damages, including local ferries, fishing boats, dive boats;
- Emergency Temporary Rental Subsidy for persons who could no longer live at their home;
- Emergency food assistance;
- Temporary financial measures for target groups in the social domain;
- Additional support for different social services;
- Revitalizing Tourism;
- Costs of the disaster management organization;
- Temporary voiding of ABB on construction materials, services and food items;
- Temporary reduction of social premiums
- Waiving property tax for 1 year;
- Temporary reduction of wage tax;
- Temporary fund to cover salaries of employees.

On October 2nd, the Executive Council officially presented its second assessment to the Netherlands, containing an overview of the damages caused by hurricane Maria. This assessment was not as broad as the first assessment, as Maria caused more rainwater and sea damage and not as much wind damage to homes. This assessment included:

- Repairs and reconstruction of the harbor;
- Support for a detailed analysis for the damage done at the harbor;
- Support for economic losses;
- Costs for disaster management.

On September 22nd, a request for assistance with emergency harbor repairs was sent to I&M and almost immediately they responded with the approval to assist us with making the harbor accessible as soon as possible. The following happened since then and in some cases is still in progress:
• On September 25th, a civil engineer was sent to Saba to assess the damage and discuss quick fixes with the Public Entity.

• A week later dredging of the small pier started with a local contractor. The top of the pier will be prepared and poured by the department of Public Works.

• In consultation with I&M, it was agreed to start repairing the deck on the new jetty so that it will be ready for the arrival of the Crystal Cruise Line in the beginning of November.

• Next week a Dutch contractor, Koole-Mammoet will bring large boulders to Saba from Curacao to restore the damaged shoreline from the harbor office to the fiber optic cable.

These actions can only be viewed as temporary solutions. Together with the Saba government, I&M and Rijkswaterstaat are currently working on a structural solution for the harbor repairs.

**Benefits of a crane on the island**

Another harbor related matter which needs clarification is the purchasing of a crane, although this happened before the hurricanes hit. In June this year, the only available crane on the island for lifting boats out of the harbor basin was damaged and has not worked since. The Executive Council saw the necessity of finding a solution for the many boat owners, many of which depend on their boats for their livelihoods. Without a crane on the island, boat owners would be forced to take their boats to St Maarten in case a storm or hurricane passed, which can not only be very expensive, but more importantly, boat storage in St. Maarten has proven to be dangerous. The Executive Council was able to build arguments which convinced the Ministry of I&M to purchase the crane for Saba. In July a suitable crane was found, it was purchased and it arrived on the island on August 15th, only 3 weeks before hurricane Irma hit. Despite some initial difficulties with operating the crane, which were mainly related to built-in safety
mechanisms to protect the crane and the operator, the crane was used to take almost all boats out of the water before Irma reached Saba, and then again for Maria. Seeing the very limited time frame and the fact that government has no experience operating a crane, it was decided to contract a local company which has experience with such equipment.

Had the Executive Council not lobbied for this crane, the majority of the fishing boats and dive boats would have had to go to St. Maarten to seek shelter for the hurricanes. Many of the boats that were in fact brought to St. Maarten to seek shelter for Irma did get damaged, whereas the boats that were removed on Saba did not. However, it must be made clear that some of the boats that went to St. Maarten were either too big for the crane to lift or did not have trailers to transport them to a safe location on land.

It should be noted that when purchasing this crane, we aimed to find the right balance between a large enough crane to be able to lift as many boats as possible and to lift containers, and a small and light enough crane to be able to move around at the harbor and the rest of the island. The 35 tonne crane that was purchased with the help of IenM, can lift almost all boats, and can still move through the S curve in the Fort Bay road to reach other parts of the island. Note, however, that because of its importance for lifting operations at the harbor (boats and containers), the primary functions of the crane are at the harbor.

Social Impact

Irma and Maria did not cause physical damage alone but this whole period was and still is a very difficult and stressful time, especially for those who suffered losses and damages. We
know that people are struggling and we can assure you that we are doing all we can to bring the necessary relief for those who were impacted. Mind you: there were already social problems on the island before the hurricanes passed and unfortunately these have only increased. We see these issues and we know the problems. Together with our on-island stakeholders we are trying to find local solutions and relief. These issues will continue to be raised with the relevant ministries in the Netherlands. We hope that eventually there will not just be short term relief but more importantly long term measures taken that will tackle the social and poverty problems here on Saba.

**Businesses and Economy**

As the hurricanes passed, another reality sank in. Saba was inaccessible for over a month. Despite being open for business, without connectivity and access to alternative resources, our already fragile economy and its stakeholders were further strained. The executive council quickly organized a meeting with all stakeholders from the private sector on September 11\(^{th}\). During this meeting we were able to discuss the problems and together find possible solutions. These sessions continued on September 15\(^{th}\) and September 29\(^{th}\), with the latter meeting catered more towards the hospitality sector. During these meetings ideas were discussed regarding relief measures requested by the Executive Council to the Netherlands. In addition to this it was announced that the island government would delay the collection of local taxes and fees for a 6 month period.

**Connectivity**

Next to these meetings with the private sector, the executive council worked diligently on finding a connectivity solution. The Edge provided the first possible solution to restore accessibility to the island. Before the Edge started operating on October 5\(^{th}\), there was no
commercial flight or ferry connection to and from Saba. At that time there were dozens of people around the world trying to get back to Saba and people on Saba who needed to leave. Seeing that Winair was not an option for the very short notice because of the uncertainty related to the damages at the airport in St. Maarten and the severe damages at their own office, and also seeing that the Dawn II had been damaged by Irma, the Edge was at that time the only possible solution to restore access to the island. The benefit of the Edge was threefold:

- Restoring access for tourists
- Enabling citizens, medical students and visitors of Saba to leave and arrive on the island
- Offering the business community new connections with other islands

Establishing an agreement with the Edge and making the connections between Saba, Statia and St. Kitts, three times per week, would have not been possible without the support of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. A detailed project proposal was prepared and within a few days, after realizing the importance of creating connectivity for Saba, the Ministry approved the proposal to support the Edge with a subsidy. This was received on September 29th and was announced during the meeting with the stakeholders in the hospitality sector. The announcement about the new Edge service was received with much enthusiasm. Finally the many questions from tourists who wanted to get to Saba could be answered. At the same meeting, an offer was made to the stakeholders to join in a networking visit to St. Kitts and Nevis on the inaugural voyage on October 5th. This offer was made available to all stakeholders in the private sector and it would have been an opportune moment to establish business relationships with various suppliers, hotels, dive shops and tour operators. Unfortunately only a few businesses made use of this opportunity. From what I understood it was a beneficial visit for those who participated.
St Kitts as alternative hub
On a government level, I led a delegation of policy workers and department heads to meet with several stakeholders and entities on St. Kitts, such as the tourism department and the tourism minister, harbor and airport officials, fisheries and the agriculture department. The proactive approach by the Saba government was well received by officials in St. Kitts, as Saba was the first island taking such steps to make connections aiming to restore a sense of normalcy for the community and private sector here on Saba. During these meetings there was sincere enthusiasm to establish a working relationship for the short term and for the long term.

Fortunately, St. Kitts was not directly impacted by either of the hurricanes and can provide a legitimate opportunity for a secondary hub for Saba. These possibilities will be further explored in the coming period. In addition to this the Ministry of I&M is assisting Saba in establishing a flight connection between St Kitts and Saba. Together with Saba, I&M is also working on other flight routes that can improve Saba’s accessibility. These routes will be established from a business perspective, with the aim to establish routes that could become sustainable and durable on the long term. With the help of the Ministry of Economic Affairs we are also working on a marketing strategy to promote the new routes to Saba and in general to market Saba as a beautiful and safe holiday destination.

Lastly, the Executive Council has organized an expert in digital media to visit Saba for a week from October 27th. She gave presentations on effective use of digital media for marketing during our tourism conference in August this year. The purpose of her visit now is to work with
our own tourist office as well as the private sector, and help them to better utilize the digital media tools that are available. This is an affordable solution for all stakeholders to start promoting Saba in a more modern way, and to show that we are ready and open for business. A detailed report about the St. Kitts visit has been submitted to the Island Council.

After providing this information there are still obvious questions:

- What will happen next?
- How will we deal with the damaged homes?
- How will we repair all structural damage?
- What kind of support and relief will ultimately be given to the business sector and the community?
- How will the Netherlands deal with the various assessments that have been submitted by the Executive Council?

Unfortunately, for the most part there is still no clarity or answers for most of these questions. It is extremely disappointing and frustrating that the Netherlands is not willing or is not in a position to make decisions that will bring the relief we need for the hurricane victims, the business community and Saba in general. We can boast about the “Saba Speed” and our ability to bounce back from two major hurricanes but eventually we will need the support from the Netherlands to fully recover and fully restore Saba to what it was before the hurricanes. One can only hope that the new Cabinet will immediately take these challenges and provide solutions for our community. To be fair, although the decision making process has been slow, the overall support from the Netherlands from all of the ministries has been very positive.

With regards to repairing the homes, this is a process that is ongoing, although it has not physically started. Building materials are on island and the assessments have been made by the Planning Bureau. We are in the process of establishing a policy for the first line of support, focusing on those homes that were damaged the most. This policy will outline which properties are eligible, what works will be done and in what manner, and describes the procedure to choose who will execute the work. It is of utmost importance that these repairs are done in a very transparent and fair manner, ensuring that the help goes to the ones who need it most. After the first line of support has been completed, we will analyze what is possible for other damages. The ultimate approval of the third budget amendment, to release the reserves to pre-finance the first line support, will ensure that the physical repairs can start sooner rather than later. Our aim at this moment is to finalize the policy this week so that the Planning Bureau can start meeting with interested contractors next week.
Closing

In closing, although we are all going through a very rough period due to the passing of two historic category 5 hurricanes, there is much that we should be grateful for. Above all, it is of utmost importance that we give thanks that there were no casualties or major injuries due to the passing of these hurricanes on Saba. We should be grateful that we did not experience the same severity in devastation other islands in our region experienced. Even though none of us are particularly pleased with the lack of urgency the Netherlands has shown regarding our recovery, the Executive Council is positive that we will receive the support needed. In the end we are in this together. We must work together to help those in need, to restore our economy and bring the infrastructure back on its feet. This will be no easy task and will not be achieved from one day to the next, even when the financial means become available. It will be a process through which together, with the Saban resilience, we will make Saba an even stronger island and community in the future.

On a final note, I would like to personally thank all entities and volunteers who came together to bring Saba back on its feet after the hurricanes. A special thank you is warranted to both locally owned Government companies Saba Electric Company and Satel, who are true examples of what resilience is. After a mere few hours after each hurricane electricity was restored on the island. For the most part, telephone service went uninterrupted and free Satel WIFI was made available to the public during the storms, allowing us to communicate with family and friends. Your dedication and resilience is greatly appreciated.