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15 March 2021

The Right Honourable Mr. Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AB

Dear Prime Minister

I extend greetings and send you my best personal regards. Regrettably, I write to you on an unfortunate matter which requires urgent attention.

All our countries are struggling to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I salute your government's heroic efforts and your admirable success at rolling out a vaccine programme swiftly and successfully. My own country has managed to inoculate approximately 20% of our residents, only because of a gift of 40,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from the Government of India. Although we paid for 40,000 doses of vaccines through the COVAX facility, we are yet to receive the supplies we ordered. Our efforts to purchase directly from major suppliers have been thwarted by a shortage of supply, occasioned by rich countries buying available stocks, and resultant high prices.

Nonetheless, my small, tourism-dependent country, which has been badly impacted by the economic consequences of the pandemic, has established and implemented, an effective programme to manage the virus. Despite this, we have seen an escalation in COVID 19 cases,. leading to increased hospitalisation and deaths.

Our efforts to create a safe environment, in which our vital tourism industry could maintain confidence, was dealt a grave blow by Public Health England (PHE) which, on March 11th, posted a notice on its website wrongly claiming that "an Antigua variant" of the coronavirus had been discovered in the UK. The PHE notice, that went viral after it was picked up by international media, has caused hotel bookings to be cancelled, setting back our economy even more. We now must redouble our efforts and will be forced to borrow more money, in order to recover the ground that PHE's action has cost us.

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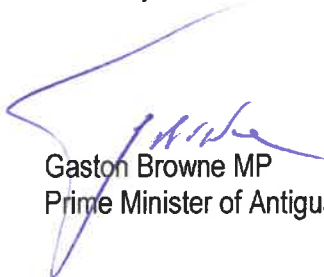
On March 13th, after the UK and international media had a frenzy of headlines of “an Antigua variant discovered by PHE, the British High Commission to Antigua and Barbuda explicitly stated that “there is no scientific evidence to determine where this variant first emerged” and that it regretted “any misunderstanding that may have arisen from the matter”. In truth, there is no evidence that any British visitor to Antigua has ever contracted COVID-19” in Antigua and Barbuda.

Nevertheless, the damage was done from the moment that PHE erroneously published the claim on its website. It is against this background that I respectfully suggest that the British Government should consider urgently recompensing Antigua and Barbuda for the damage that one of its principal agencies has done to our economy and the welfare of our people. We believe appropriate recompense would be a donation to Antigua and Barbuda from Britain of what would be to your economy and resources a small quantity of 100,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccines.

Our two countries have had a long history of close relations which we, as Prime Ministers, have every interest in deepening and strengthening. We ask that your Government favourably consider our proposal.

I look forward to hearing from you, as I again extend my personal good wishes.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gaston Browne', is written over a large, stylized blue scribble that resembles a signature or a large mark.

Gaston Browne MP
Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda