Cabinet Special Envoy
BONAIRE , ST. EUSTATIUS, SABA

NEWS

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A First Step



This edition of the newsletter features the official commissioning of the Galileo Sensor Station on Bonaire, the “EU Satellite Systems in the Greater Caribbean: Navigating the Future” conference, and the inauguration of the Princess Catharina-Amalia Space Innovation Park.

During a working visit to Brussels in 2019, then Island Governor of Bonaire, Edison Rijna, learned that the European Commission was looking for a location in the Caribbean to build a ground station for the Galileo satellite system. “I immediately looked into the opportunity and quickly came to the conclusion that it would be a great opportunity if Bonaire were selected. Everywhere I went in Brussels and at ministries in The Hague, I made sure to mention that we were interested.”

After being appointed Special Envoy for Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba, Rijna continued to advocate for bringing the sensor station to Bonaire. Together with project manager Jim Bos, appointed by the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, all requirements and conditions were carefully mapped out. “It was clear that the European Commission would take a very thorough approach. Several islands were in the running, and an inspection team carefully assessed all proposed locations. One factor that worked in Bonaire’s favor was that we are a special municipality of the Netherlands, an European Union (EU) Member State.”

Rijna views the opening of the ground station as only the beginning. “Right now, the data received from the satellites is transmitted elsewhere for analysis. It would be great if data processing could eventually take place on Bonaire as well, as it would create more highly skilled jobs. In addition, we could play a role in other European space programmes, such as Copernicus, which helps monitor climate change, and IRIS², which will provide secure communication services. In 2019, I had to explain to everyone where Bonaire was. Thanks to the Galileo Sensor Station, that is no longer necessary.”

Director-General Afke van Rijn of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management highlighted the significance of the Galileo Sensor Station for Bonaire:

“The Galileo Sensor Station is of great importance to Bonaire. Beyond creating jobs and supporting tourism, it will also benefit science and technology in the region and serve as a catalyst for new ideas and innovation.”

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The Cabinet of the Special Envoy
for Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba, for EU and UN Funds and Economic Relations with Latin America, was established in 2023 by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations with the aim of facilitating the governments of Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba, as well as organizations and businesses, in their interactions with the European Union and the United Nations, and in initiating trade missions.

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EU Space Programme Benefits the Whole World

“Thank you for bringing space to Bonaire, and Bonaire to space!” said European Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius, in a video message to participants of the EU Satellite Conference on Bonaire.

“What you discuss today, will help us to do a better job tomorrow. This very important conference proves three things. First, that the EU Space programme benefits not only the European continent, but the whole world. Latin America, the Caribbean and also Bonaire. We have Galileo, the greatest satellite navigation system in the world. And Copernicus, the greatest satellite observation system in the world. And we offer them to the whole world free of charge. Because shared knowledge is power. Power to change our world for the better.

Second, today you prove that we invest in space to benefit people not in the future, but right now, right here on Earth, right here in the Caribbean, right here on Bonaire. Space helps to forecast and manage sargassum influxes, a major challenge in this region. Space provides vital information to first responders in their search and rescue operations. Space helps monitor the quality of coastal waters, mangroves and coastal habitats, as well as rainfall, drought, pollution and climate change. Space helps farming and tourism. And it helps to build new roads. Space helps to detect suspicious ships. And to save lives at sea. In short, space supports all areas of our partnerships under the EU Global Gateway. And in the future, IRIS² will bring secure connectivity to every corner in the world. Also to Latin America and the Caribbean.

There is a third point this conference demonstrates: by bringing space to Bonaire, it shows that the EU Space Programme not only benefits Bonaire, but that Bonaire also strengthens the programme through data collection and partnership. What you discuss today, will help us to do a better job tomorrow.”





Galileo’s Lasting Impact

“I still have a big smile on my face,” reflects Lianne Mooldijk on the conference marking the official opening of the Galileo Sensor Station on Bonaire. As Head of Space at the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, she has been closely involved in bringing the station to the island in recent years.

“Jim Bos dedicated many years to this project within our team, and I took over after his retirement. When I discussed with Bianca Peters, Liaison at the Cabinet Special Envoy for Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba, how to mark the opening of the ground station, we decided it would be a great idea to organize a conference. We wanted to share the bigger picture of the opportunities offered by space, and above all to involve the people of Bonaire and the wider region. That’s how the idea for the conference and the surrounding events came about.”

The organizers wanted to make the benefits of space technology as tangible as possible for organizations and residents of the islands.

“Many space conferences are held in Europe, where people are already familiar with its applications. On the islands, however, this is still relatively new territory. The ground station provided an excellent opportunity to explain the benefits and opportunities that all those satellites orbiting above us can bring to everyday life. From monitoring sargassum and sea-level rise, to the fact that Galileo can make the difference between life and death if something happens to you at sea.”
According to Mooldijk, the conference succeeded in achieving those goals. “None of this would have been possible without the fantastic cooperation between the Cabinet Special Envoy for Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba, the National office for the Caribbean Netherlands (RCN), and our own team. It was truly a joint effort. Another great addition was the presence of André Kuipers. His experience as an astronaut, combined with his ability to inspire, captures the imagination of young and old alike. It was an incredible week.”

But the story does not end there. Coinciding with the commissioning of the ground station, the Princess Catharina-Amalia Space Innovation Park was officially opened. “The island government indicated in its discussions with us that it wanted to explore ways to demonstrate that Bonaire is an attractive hub for innovation and appealing to, for example, start-ups. One of the ideas is to establish an educational visitor centre with a small space exhibition, helping to raise awareness of the many possibilities that space technology offers. These plans will be further developed in the coming years.”

The first spin-off effects are already becoming visible. Local companies, whose staff were trained by European experts to maintain the equipment at the ground station, have already secured their first assignments from elsewhere in the region thanks to their specialized expertise.



A Trusted Ally in Brussels



For anyone visiting Brussels' Quartier Européen for the first time, with its towering office buildings and complex institutions, it is easy to feel small, especially when you represent a small island in the Caribbean. For Edison Rijna, former Island Governor of Bonaire and current Special Envoy for Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba, having a trusted ally at the heart of the European Union has proven invaluable.

very large organization, but it is also not always organized in the most intuitive way. In that case, it is invaluable to know someone who has been working here for many years and who also knows Bonaire."

For Van Eijndthoven, supporting the island came naturally. I was happy to help, especially because the Galileo programme is important for Bonaire, a small island facing

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Jolanda van Eijndthoven serves as Head of Unit for Legal Affairs, International Affairs and Coordination within the European Commission's Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space.

"In 2018, I became involved in the discussions about establishing a Galileo Sensor Station on Bonaire. A colleague responsible for the Galileo programme knew that I was very familiar with the island and thought it would be helpful for me to participate in the discussions. My role was actually quite modest. Edison Rijna and his team did most of the work themselves."

Modest though she may be, the Special Envoy speaks highly of the support Van Eijndthoven provided. "It is reassuring to have someone who can help you find your way. If you are not in Brussels on a daily basis, it is difficult to understand how everything works. Not only is the EU a

major challenges. The arrival of the ground station has brought the subject of space much closer to the local community. Space plays a far greater role in our daily lives than most people realize. The islands will increasingly benefit from the data being transmitted from space to Earth, particularly in areas such as climate change. These data enable better-informed policy decisions and more effective measures."

Although Van Eijndthoven is no longer directly involved in the Galileo project, her connection with the Cabinet Special Envoy for Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba remains strong. "I am always there for them, whether it is helping them identify the right person to speak to on a particular issue or sharing developments that may be of interest to Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba. Whenever I come across something relevant, I make sure they know about it."

The Human Factor

“Satellite data and digital technologies can play a very important role”, said State Secretary for Kingdom Relations and Effective Government Eric van der Burg in a video message.

“What you are doing here today really matters. Because, across the Caribbean, including the Caribbean parts of the Dutch Kingdom, we are dealing with some very real and urgent issues. This is where satellite data and digital technologies can play a very important role. They can help us respond faster when disasters strike. Improve search and rescue operations. Monitor what is happening in our environment. And make better data driven decisions about how we use space and resources. But of course, technology alone does not solve anything. It’s people working together that make the difference. You have partners from across Europe working side by side with stakeholders from other ministries in The Netherlands. Such as the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate.

The Caribbean parts of the Kingdom. Regional partners like the Association of Caribbean States. And countries such as Colombia, Panama and Chili. That mix of perspectives, expertise, and experience is incredibly valuable. Because the reality is, no single country or organization can tackle these challenges alone. Our Caribbean islands are in a unique position. They are part of the Kingdom, part of Europe, and at the same time deeply connected to the Caribbean and Latin America. That creates opportunities, but also a responsibility to make sure the islands are fully included in innovation, investment, and international cooperation.



And that brings me to something important. The European Union’s Global Gateway initiative is investing heavily in Latin America and the Caribbean. These are major investments. And they focus on exactly the kind of things you’re discussing this week: digital infrastructure, connectivity, climate resilience, disaster risk management and sustainable economic development. Satellite technology plays a key role in all of that. The Galileo Sensor Station on Bonaire is a great example of that. So my message to all of you is simple: make the most of these days.

Connect, collaborate, and think beyond the conference. Because the real impact will be in what comes next. The partnerships you build, the projects you start, and the solutions you deliver. From our side, we remain fully committed to working together. Within the Kingdom, with the European Union, and across the region.”



Space Education for the Next Generation

“It was intense, but I really enjoyed it,” reflects journalist, author and space enthusiast Sander Koenen on the conference, where he was invited to serve as moderator. Together with astronaut André Kuipers, who completed space missions in 2004 and 2011, he also helped facilitate several public events.

“With the new Galileo Sensor Station, Bonaire is making an important contribution to the satellite navigation systems we all use. So when I was asked to take part in the conference and surrounding events, I did not hesitate for a moment.”

One of the highlights took place at the Wilhelminaplein, where the film Beyond, Ode to the Earth was screened outdoors. “It truly was a special open-air cinema evening under a beautiful starry sky, with the Moon, Jupiter and Venus visible above the screen. It felt like pure magic.”

After the screening, children in the audience were invited onto the stage to ask questions. It was a great way to engage the wider public in the conference.

At youth centre Jong Bonaire, Koenen and Kuipers gave seven lectures to more than one hundred students about what it is like to live and work in space, and how satellites are used on Earth for navigation and communication.

“Through SpaceBuzz, the children were able to take a virtual journey into space and look at Earth from above. Children know all about Google Maps, but they usually don’t realize that Earth observation satellites allow us to study our planet in much greater detail. They can monitor nature on the island, track sargassum threatening the coastline, or even discovering shipwrecks.”

The sessions sparked curiosity and thoughtful questions from the students.

“Children are incredibly curious, we received very sharp questions. We also delivered two lectures at the library in Kralendijk for both young people and adults. The conference and outreach activities clearly showed what space technology means for our daily lives here on Earth. It was an intense but very rewarding week. I left feeling energized. And it is fantastic to see young entrepreneurs being inspired by this initiative.”

Koenen also expressed his hope that similar educational sessions could be organized on the other islands in the future.







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