

Address to the Nation

By

His Excellency Bharrat Jagdeo

President of the Republic of Guyana

On the Occasion of

The 41st Anniversary of Guyana's Independence

26 May 2007

Tonight, on the eve of our country's 41st Independence we meet to celebrate our liberation from colonial rule. No human contrivance can be compared to freedom which in our case was won through three centuries of dogged resistance, enduring resilience and supreme sacrifice of the Guyanese people. Independence therefore is a symbol of our country's freedom and a lasting tribute to the men and women who with determination broke the shackles of colonial repression, exploitation and domination.

At the stroke of midnight, Guyana will fittingly commemorate the anniversary of the attainment of this freedom by reliving that momentous occasion when the Golden Arrowhead was raised for the very first time (right here in the National Park).

The celebration of our nationhood is an occasion to acknowledge our worth as nation. I wish to express my appreciation to all of you, especially the young people, for your continued contributions to our country, your respect for our cultural diversity and your unrelenting displays of patriotism whenever Guyana summons you.

Over the past year, Guyana has had to call on you more than once, including for the Rio Summit and World Cup Cricket. And each time you responded in extraordinary ways that made our nation beam with pride. The oneness that was exhibited during major national undertakings over the past year was reminiscent of the unity evident when Guyana secured its independence forty-one years ago.

Tonight on the eve of our 41st anniversary we renew that charter of nationhood, we revisit that collective aspiration as we herald renewed hope for a Guyana predicated on justice and democracy, standing ready to face the challenges of today and the future.

Fellow Guyanese,

Among the challenges we face today is an extremely competitive and uncertain external economic environment, characterized by volatile commodity markets. World prices for many of our imports, particularly fuel, have risen astronomically, a situation compounded by less than favourable prices for some of our main commodity exports, especially sugar.

The government however is not daunted by these challenges. As part of the realignment of our economy, we have identified the threats to our major sectors and have begun the process of reconfiguring the economy beginning with the modernization of the traditional sectors. Long the mainstays of our economy, these sectors are being reinvigorated through massive injection of capital investment, both public and private, so as to increase their competitiveness. At the same time, we are diversifying the economic base of the country by moving increasingly into services and greater value-added production thereby ensuring that we develop a balanced economy, one that is ever expanding especially into new growth areas such as tourism, information technology, agro-processing and aquaculture.

I am however convinced that Guyana can accelerate its economic progress through major infrastructural projects. Hydroelectricity represents one such project that we are pursuing and which we are confident will ensure the reliable and relatively inexpensive energy necessary to improve the competitiveness of our industries. The industrial production of ethanol is another enterprise offering scope for a reduction in our oil import bill and an increase in export earnings. Another sector capable of attracting massive investment, revolutionizing the way we do things and adding to our international competitiveness is Information Communication Technology. Progress is however being stymied by the monopoly that is enjoyed by the main telephone company. I am convinced that taking decisive steps to end the monopoly and liberalize the telecommunication sector will encourage significant investments.

With each passing day, investors are showing keen interest in our country. The investments presently in the pipeline along with those anticipated in the near future will ensure that we continue to generate jobs, create new industries, and sustain economic growth.

Fellow Guyanese,

Our economy is on a sound footing. Last year economic growth was almost five per cent, and this year the economy is expected to grow above the average for countries within the region. We have maintained a sustainable Balance of Payments position despite the effects of higher international fuel prices while our foreign reserves increased to US\$278M at the end of last year. The Guyana dollar remains relatively stable and domestic credit has increased as more

Guyanese take advantage of favourable lending rates. All of these send a signal of confidence to investors and provide incentives to growth.

Through a prudent debt strategy consisting of sustainable borrowing, repayment and debt relief we have restored this country to financial and economic viability thereby freeing future generations of Guyanese from the burden of an unsustainable and unmanageable foreign debt, an achievement that should evoke national pride and confidence. However, as important as debt relief is, if its benefits are to result in an improvement in the quality of national life, it requires supporting policies such as a solid economic strategy and a concerted focus on the social sector.

Already, our spending in the social sector is about 23% of GDP, its highest level ever. We have achieved two of the Millennium Development Goals, namely the eradication of extreme poverty and the attainment of universal primary education. Our national goal is for all students to have access to quality secondary education and tertiary training. This must take account of the evolving nature of education which demands a greater focus on science and information technology and an improvement in the delivery of the curricula.

The construction of several health facilities is expanding health care throughout the country. However there is a lack of adequate doctors, a situation that is expected to be relieved through external recruitment and the return of Guyanese students presently studying medicine in Cuba. The first large batch of 69 graduating doctors will return in 2009, and every year after will see additional Guyanese medical personnel returning home to work in the health sector.

The main focus of our health sector strategy is primary health care, but recognising the need for advanced tertiary care, the government has worked with the private sector to establish cancer and advanced cardiac treatment and intends to introduce hip-replacement, laparoscopic and retina surgical interventions at the Georgetown Hospital.

We also intend to spend more on water and housing infrastructure inclusive of the upgrading and regularization of squatter settlements so as to improve the quality of life for households.

Fellow Guyanese,

As an independent nation, we must create a caring and humane society, one in which we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, where the poor and elderly receive assistance, and where the weak and indigent are given protection and help. As I have previously indicated, the bedrock of my administration's human services programs will be to foster a compassionate society in which there is a preferential option for all vulnerable groups.

We must however first begin by holding government agencies accountable for their performance, since the failure to meet expected standards will have an adverse impact on the poor and vulnerable, especially for pensioners. Old-age pension books for 2007 were distributed early but I am far from satisfied with the situation at the post offices when pensioners go to uplift their pensions. I am equally dismayed at the plight of thousands of NIS contributors who cannot receive their pensions simply because a proper record of contributions was not kept by the Scheme. This situation has to be remedied.

As we demand greater accountability by public offices, we must also extend a protective hand to the most vulnerable in our midst. Too many of our children are exposed to dangers and hardships that are preventable. Through initiatives such as Mission Operation Child Protection, the Child Protection Agency, and legislation dealing with juvenile offenders and sexual offences against minors, as well as with other initiatives we will comprehensively address the vulnerabilities of our children.

Fellow Guyanese,

As citizens of an independent nation we must appreciate that while government has a great many duties, there is a concomitant obligation on the part of citizens to assume greater responsibility within society. For example, while government will continue to take steps to reduce road fatalities on our roadways, the users of our public roadways have an obligation to use the roadways in a safe manner. At the same time, while a great deal more can and is being done to reduce flooding in Guyana, all our efforts will be compromised if we do not desist from the indiscriminate dumping of rubbish, and commit to keeping our surroundings and communities clean and free of litter.

This sense of responsibility must extend to the payment of taxes which is a national obligation since those taxes go back to provide services and benefits to all sectors of the society. While taxes are now more transparent and in most cases lower, it has not been matched by a corresponding responsiveness on the part of many businesses to allow consumers to benefit from reduced taxes and excise the cancer of tax evasion.

Fellow Guyanese,

I cannot promise you that we will fix every fault within our society overnight since we do not have the resources to attend to every problem at the same time. What I can assure you through is that your needs will not go unnoticed and that your government will ensure that it plays its

part to ensure that living conditions improve. However, I also expect that every citizen would equally honour his or her social obligations.

I can also assure you that all segments of this multicultural society will benefit from the gains of national development. As has been the norm, my government will ensure that no grouping feels cut off or deprived of the resources of the State. Our record on this score speaks for itself.

Crime-fighting remains a formidable challenge but the successes of the past few years have been heartening and I confident that with the resources at the disposal of the law enforcement agencies and with the support of the public we will be able to enjoy a safer society. The government shall continue to provide the law enforcement agencies with the requisite resources to reduce crime.

We shall also ensure that the efforts of good police work and investigations are not undermined through poor prosecution and other problems within the judicial system. This is one of the reasons why under the Justice Administration Reform Project we shall not only be strengthening the functioning of the Court system but also that of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. The reform will also target sloth and the backlog in the judicial system. It is unconscionable that in some instances, years after cases are heard, no written judgments are available. We also need to hold the judiciary accountable for its performance.

Fellow Guyanese,

A cornerstone of sovereignty is the right to pursue our own foreign policy. Guyana remains deeply committed to the regional integration process. We shall also deepen political, economic, social, sporting and cultural ties with the countries of Latin America. In international fora, Guyana will continue to advocate the principles of peaceful settlement of disputes, non-aggression against States, respect for the territorial integrity of nations and peaceful co-existence. The promotion of a New Global Human Order remains a pivotal foreign policy objective and we shall support its retention on the international agenda.

At the political level, the charter over the next four years will seek to solidify and deepen the democratic gains of the past fifteen years, including safeguarding the supremacy of our Constitution and respecting its enshrined fundamental rights. Just recently, I met with the Leader of the Opposition and we agreed to advance the work of local government reform which will ultimately renew and strengthen democracy at the local level. I will continue to actively seek collaboration with the leaders of all opposition parties on matters of national importance.

Fellow Guyanese,

Tonight I ask you to work with me to achieve that vision of Guyana that must have been dreamt a thousand times by our ancestors. Theirs was a dream of a democracy, united and free, where our people live in peace and harmony, respecting religious and ethnic diversities, a Guyana with developed infrastructure where parents can raise their children sure in the knowledge that with hard work every one can climb the ladder to success.

Let us ensure that when people speak about Guyana their immediate thoughts are about a country with a growing economy, a business- friendly environment, strong communities; a country where educational and health services are on par with the developed world and accessible by all.

Let us work together to fashion a safer country, where the elderly can grow old gracefully, and where the depressed, indigent and the poor can find support and compassion.

Let us use the 41st Independence Anniversary to reflect on the glorious struggles of our ancestors who ignited the torch of freedom, struggling valiantly for the day when their descendants could boast about being “architects of their own fortune and hewers of their destiny.” Then let us commit to transforming through our collective efforts this place that we call home into the great nation that it was ordained to become. And let us move forward into a brighter future anchored to the ideals of freedom, unity and prosperity for all.

Long Live the Republic of Guyana! Happy 41st Independence Anniversary!