

Address to the Nation

By

His Excellency Bharrat Jagdeo

President of the Republic of Guyana

On the Occasion of

The 42nd Anniversary of Guyana's Independence

26 May 2008

On this day 42 years ago, the Golden Arrowhead flew for the first time above a free and independent Guyana. As we gather here tonight, we pay tribute to those who struggled and sacrificed to ensure our freedom. We acknowledge the earlier generations who led the fight for freedom from slavery and all forms of oppression, and to more recent generations who sustained this resolve to create a democratic Guyana. These generations of brave and patriotic Guyanese have collectively ensured that today we are a sovereign State.

If today's generation is to live up to the noble ideals bequeathed by our ancestors, then we must continue the struggle to remove injustice and create opportunities for all our people. For Independence Day is not just about reflecting on the successes and challenges of the past. It also provides us with an opportunity to draw inspiration for the future, and to re-dedicate ourselves to the hard work necessary to create an ever-better Guyana.

This is especially necessary at the time when we are experiencing a global fuel crisis which has caused the price of oil to reach levels scarcely dreamt of one year ago. Over the past 5 years, the price of crude oil has moved from about US\$ 25 per barrel to US\$135 per barrel, absorbing enormous amounts of our scarce foreign exchange, and increasing our cost of production and cost of living.

Changing global consumption patterns, drought and bio- fuel policies have placed upward pressures on the prices of basic foodstuffs worldwide. Guyana is not exempt from the effects of this contagion- our people feel the impact of these global dynamics each day.

Climate change is an increasingly visible reality in our country. More recently, we have witnessed the devastation on production and lives associated with adverse weather patterns

and flooding. It is estimated by the United Nations that 60% of our GDP was lost in the 2005 floods.

As we battle to contain these problems that originate outside our borders, we have been confronted internally by evil forces whose depravity led them to perpetuate barbarous acts of terrorism, such as those witnessed at and Lusignan and Bartica earlier this year.

These are, but some of the challenges facing our nation today. There are many others which result from an increasingly inter-dependent global economy, including changes in terms of trade for sugar and other exports; globalised demand for our most skilled workers which leads to outward migration; and international criminal networks which when coupled with unfair deportation policies of the developed world, contribute to increased criminality in our society.

When faced with challenges like these, it would be easy to succumb to doubt and to be overwhelmed by their magnitude. We in Guyana did not cause climate change. No decision made here caused the global price of oil or food to increase. We have no influence over the drug users in the developed world whose lifestyles lead to demand for criminal networks which threaten much of the developing world.

Fellow Guyanese,

We shall not retreat or succumb in the face of these adversities. If the independence we celebrate today is to mean anything, it should inspire us to draw from within ourselves a sense of confidence that there is a Guyanese destiny greater than the problems we face today, and that through a combination of vision and hard work we will overcome the challenges we face.

This means acting decisively in the short-term to deal with problems, but it also means keeping our sights on delivering a strategic vision for our country that will provide us with the long-term foundations for a secure, prosperous and socially- just nation.

This is the approach that my Government is taking.

Every day, the law enforcement agencies are working to bring to justice the perpetrators of the Lusignan and Bartica massacres, as well as other violent crimes. They are being supported by intelligence supplied by an ever widening group of Guyanese. To give continued support and impetus to the anti-crime initiatives and to ensure a broad- based national response, we will continue to engage national stakeholders in finding solutions to this dilemma. In addition to these measures, we are implementing practical initiatives through our Security Sector Strategy- actions which will significantly increase the long-term capability of our security services.

Fellow Guyanese,

My government is mindful of the increased cost of living facing the general population. We have responded by extending the range of zero-rated items, removed the import taxes on diesel, lowered the import duties on gasoline and provided a subsidy to prevent the price of bread from rising. Through the New Guyana Marketing Corporation we are making cheaper flour and rice available to consumers. We have further supported these interventions by making more money available to our citizens through increases in wages, pensions and social assistance, an increase in the income tax threshold and by providing a cost of living adjustment for public workers earning below \$50,000 per month. In addition, we have for sometime now been absorbing electricity and water costs which would otherwise have had to be passed on to consumers. All of these measures are costing the Treasury billions of dollars.

As we try to cushion the impact of the rising global food and fuel prices, we shall ensure that social services particularly health and education are not compromised by the revenues expended and foregone through these short-term initiatives. Equally, we are repositioning our economy over the long-term. The policies to achieve this are brought together in the National Competitiveness Strategy.

Fellow Guyanese,

These are not merely statements of aspirations. We are frequently seeing that many Guyanese businesses have the innovation and entrepreneurship to create new economic successes. One significant example is the rapid emergence of a vibrant Information and Communications technology-enabled outsourcing sector employing well in excess of 1000 persons and growing at more than 40% per year. This sector is on track to emerge as one of our major exporting segments of our economy within the next five years.

The reaction of international customers to the Guyanese professionals who provide services in this industry is almost entirely positive, proving that Guyana can compete and win in a highly competitive global market-place. These developments should serve as an inspiration to innovators and entrepreneurs across our country – whether in diversified agriculture, agri-processing, eco-tourism, aquaculture, value-added forestry products, or any of the newly emerging economic sectors, which along with the modernization of the traditional sectors of the economy will form the bedrock of the new economy that is evolving.

However, even as we patiently advance the reforms outlined in our national strategies and continue to grow new sectors in our economy, we also need to see the possibilities that are in the midst of the challenges we face.

In today's world, we have an unprecedented opportunity to forge a new economy, where we harness new global economic forces for our national benefit. Climate change, globalisation,

rising global populations and prosperity, and regional development are forces that create challenges, but they also represent a historic opening for our country.

Rising fuel prices make investment in hydro-electricity far more attractive, and enable us to secure the long sought after financing to eliminate our dependence on oil for the generation of electricity. In time, this may also enable us to export electricity to other countries.

Rising food prices provide us with a particularly valuable opportunity. Global demand for food will double by 2030 and we have enormous advantages to make the most of this opening. The “Grow More Food” campaign is not just an emotive slogan, but a call-to-action for our farmers and businesses to think big and to realise that we can build large-scale agri-businesses here in Guyana, thereby creating employment for our young people. In so doing we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that agriculture is solely a rural phenomenon and restricted to working the land. It, also, in fact, has to do with integrated linkages to research and development, marketing, pesticide, chemical and allied industries, infrastructure and agro-processing.

As we forge this new economy, there is one further area where Guyana can literally lead the world, and this is our ability to advance the world’s attempts to avert the worst extremes of climate change. The importance of tropical forests to the world is well known. Tropical forests store carbon and are home to a wealth of bio-diversity. Tropical deforestation contributes about 20% of the world’s greenhouse gases. Yet in the Kyoto Protocol there is very little incentive to address this problem compared with other sources of greenhouses gases. We are working to reverse this disproportionality. We are arguing that there should be market-based incentives for the preservation of rainforests. If this goal is realized, we could see significant flows to countries like Guyana, resources that can be deployed to protect our people and productive lands from rising sea levels, and to support the investments in health, education and low-carbon economic activities.

Key to achieving this is building the necessary arguments for a post-Kyoto climate agreement. We are joining with strategic partners from across the world to do this.

As I have publicly stated on a number of occasions, we are open to receiving proposals on how Guyana’s rainforest can be deployed in the global battle against climate change. Much has been said about this, and not all of it is accurate, so I want to use tonight as an opportunity to repeat three fundamental points. One, Guyana’s sovereignty over our rainforest is not up for negotiation. Two, the legitimate development aspirations of our people will always come first, and three, when the time comes to discuss proposals for how we will implement this vision, all Guyanese will have the opportunity to participate fully in the debate on proposed solutions. I am confident that this national debate will show the world that our independent Guyana possesses a capacity to participate with the international community, not as a poor country

looking for handouts but as a proud, independent nation with an understanding of how environmental vision can sustain prosperity and the path to social justice. Our late president Dr. Cheddi Jagan addressed some of these issues in his proposal for a New Global Human Order.

Fellow Guyanese,

Throughout our history, our traditions and values have sustained our people through testing times. As we move forward confident in our ability to forge a united, secure and prosperous future, let us keep intact the values which have been a source of strength to our people- values of hard and honest work, our deep sense of religiosity, our devotion to the well- being of our children, respect and concern for the elderly and most of all compassion for with grief and the sick.

My fellow Guyanese,

Carifesta the brain child of one of our former presidents, Forbes Burhnam will return to Guyana in August. Let us all together in the proud Guyanese tradition, put on the best show ever.

Tonight as we celebrate our 42nd Independence, let us also join together to send best wishes to our first President, Mr. Arthur Chung. He is ailing at the moment. I know I speak for all Guyanese when I wish him a speedy recovery.

My Fellow Guyanese: A Happy Independence Day to all.