

Address to the Nation

By

His Excellency Bharrat Jagdeo

President of the Republic of Guyana

On the Occasion of

The 43rd Anniversary of Guyana's Independence

26 May 2009

My fellow Guyanese:

Tonight we meet here to reenact that momentous day in our history when the Union Jack was lowered, and for the first time the Golden Arrowhead flew proudly in the night's sky. This symbolic act stated boldly to the world that Guyana had the status of an independent nation.

This annual observance is intended to celebrate the attainment of this important status as a nation, and to ensure that no Guyanese ever forgets the struggle that was successfully waged in the long road to securing the birth of independent Guyana.

For those of you who are old enough to have borne witness to this historic event, and to have participated in the fight for independence, I am sure that the sense of patriotism that was evoked on that occasion will inspire you to spare no effort in cultivating in the present and future generations, the values of struggle and sacrifice for the cause of our country.

It is only fitting that on the anniversary of an occasion of such historical significance, we acknowledge the contributions of those before us who fought valiantly, even dying so that we could live a life of freedom.

This freedom we earned at Independence was not absolute but was one we have constantly had to defend and protect, just as the next generation and the generations to come will have to safeguard and secure the boundaries of true independence.

Indeed, throughout the period since our colonial experience, until today, Guyana has had to overcome adversity in all forms and fashion, both within and without, in order to continue to

give true meaning to our independence and to build a nation in which our citizens can realise their aspirations.

In essence, struggle has become a necessary part of the life of Guyanese. We are here today because of the resolve of our forebears to struggle indefatigably for our day in the sun. The theater of our battles has been everywhere-streets, chambers, press, courts and markets. Men, women, and children, believers and non believers have been in the struggle for Guyana. That we have prevailed stands testimony to the righteousness of our struggle and to the commitment and resolve of our fighters.

Fellow Guyanese,

Today the fight is keener and the stakes are higher. The global fuel, food, and economic crises that have unfolded over the past year are perhaps good examples of these adversities and the suddenness with which they have appeared.

Much of last year was characterised by a fuel and food crisis that saw the most rapid price escalation in living memory. Just as the historically high oil prices threatened the viability of fuel intensive industries and impacted on the cost of transportation and food production, so did food prices threaten to condemn millions around the world to hunger and poverty.

In Guyana, my Government's policy response was swift and focused, and directed at protecting the welfare of the working people and the most vulnerable in our society. Our strategy was aimed at ensuring the continued availability of affordable supplies of basic necessities and restricting the "pass through" of imported price increases.

In direct response to the upward movement in fuel prices, we intervened by reducing the excise tax on fuel, thereby providing direct protection to final consumers of fuel products and securing the continued viability of those productive sectors for whom fuel is a significant input. We also provided a cash subsidy to the Guyana Power and Light (GPL), which cushioned the effects of high fuel costs on both businesses and households.

Similarly, to soften the impact of high food prices, my Government provided millions of dollars in subsidies to reduce the cost of essential food items such as bread and wheat flour, and to ensure continued distribution of staples at affordable prices.

These and the other interventions implemented, came at significant fiscal cost. However, by astute management of the economy, we were able to contain the growth of the fiscal deficit, maintain adequate international reserves and stable exchange rates, and thus safeguard the

continued growth in the economy. Furthermore, all of this we achieved while sustaining spending on investments in the social sector and in infrastructure.

This fuel and food crisis was followed by the unparalleled current global financial and economic crisis which has overturned decades of economic orthodoxy underpinned by the neo liberal ideology and characterized by free market fundamentalism . The virtual collapse of the financial markets in the major capitals of the world has led to losses in excess of 50 trillion US dollars, left millions of workers jobless and homeless, and created an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety. The crisis has sapped the confidence of the markets, led to recession in the developed world and a bleak outlook for developing countries.

The collapse of the ideology of unfettered markets and the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States have created the opportunity and hope for the reform of colonial and post colonial international relations and institutions such as the United Nations, the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organizations, all with their inherent bias towards the interests of the developed world. The challenge remains to reshape global relations so as to make this century the century of the developing world where five of the six billion inhabitants of the world reside.

As Guyana plays its part in advocating for these changes in the reform and restructuring of global international relations and institutions, and as we and as we do so in the context of an unprecedented global financial crisis, we must address the impact of this crisis at home.

While it is inevitable that a small open economy such as ours will feel the effects of this global crisis, the challenge before us is not just to respond to the immediate consequences of the crisis but also to ensure that our responses are consistent with and supportive of our national development thrust to create a new economy.

Fortunately, the application of sound and responsible macroeconomic policies over the past decade and a half has provided us with the policy space needed for crisis management of the economy. During that period, we have built up our foreign reserves, reduced our external indebtedness to sustainable levels, diversified our productive and export bases and strengthened our revenue base. We have also catalyzed emerging sectors such as information technology, aqua culture, tourism and environmental services which will form the core of the new economy. In addition we have fortified the integrity of our financial system by legislating for a stronger regulatory framework. With the enactment of modern anti - money laundering legislation we have moved to become consistent with international best practices. All of these measures are intended to ensure that we emerge from the present global crisis stronger and with a larger economy that is globally competitive. This is as much a challenge for our private sector as it is for the government.

Fellow Guyanese,

A key concern of mine is the preservation and advancement of the welfare gains we have attained through our proven commitment to human development. The government will continue to make investments aimed at enhancing the quality of life of our citizens especially the vulnerable.

In this regard, we will continue to improve access of our citizens to housing, potable water, electricity, education and health care. The strides that we have made in these areas since taking office in 1992 have been tremendous. And our housing drive has made an unenviable contribution towards improving the quality of life of our people. Forthcoming initiatives in our housing policy will further demonstrate my administration's thrust to heighten the dignity of Guyanese by transforming them into home owners. These new initiatives, calculated to provide our people with the means to overcome the financial hurdles in erecting homes, would see within the next three years the expansion of the hinterland housing drive; the provision of six billion dollars to create new infrastructure and other improvements in existing housing areas, and the establishment of a revolving fund of two billion dollars to assist those who have acquired house lots but who lack access to financing.

Fellow Guyanese,

Our commitment to fostering pride and dignity amongst Guyanese would not allow us to tolerate the abuse of our women and children. My administration remains committed to building a legislative shield to protect our women and children even as we recognize that legislation is just one of many means which are required to end the sickening and tragic scourge of domestic violence.. In this regard, legislative interventions have been made that comprehensively address the welfare of children.. Legislation including the Child Care Protection Agency Bill, the Protection of Children Bill, the Status of Children Bill and the Adoption of Children Bill have been enacted. Work is also proceeding on the Child Care Services and Development Bill and the Custody, Guardianship and Maintenance of Children Bill. In response to the alarming level of domestic violence and the horrific murders, my Administration has intensified its support to victims by increasing the funding for the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security, Legal Aid and Help and Shelter, and caused to be instituted a more sensitive and proactive approach by the Guyana Police Force in responding to the victims.

The constitutional rights commission to protect the welfare of women and children has secured parliamentary adoption and would soon be operational and thus provide another plank of support for our women and children. A Family Court is to be established which would consolidate the handling of all family- related legal matters under its jurisdiction. This action

will contribute to easing the frustrations experienced by families in the encounters with the judicial system. In addition, our outmoded laws concerning Juvenile Offenders are being amended since it is recognised that juvenile offenders need to be handled differently from adult criminals. Furthermore, a new Bill on Sexual Offences, to remove archaic laws, is under review.

The legislative tool has also been used to address the difficult situation of crime and violence in our communities. We have revolutionized court rules dealing with evidence and procedures. We have also instituted harsher penalties including identifying non bailable offences such as piracy. We have also enacted laws to provide for mandatory supervision for convicted felons of certain crimes including pedophilia.

Due to the carnage on the road, we have introduced legislation to penalise driving under the influence of alcohol and provide for the use of radar guns to control speeding, two of the most common causes of fatalities from traffic accidents

Fellow Guyanese,

I have so far presented some of the challenges we face and the responses of my Administration. However, there remains one outstanding global challenge and I refer to Climate Change, one that threatens not only economic and financial systems but the very existence of life on the planet.

As all of you are aware, Guyana has not been immune to the effects of global warming. Unseasonal weather patterns and rising sea levels have necessitated increased expenditure to address the consequences of flooding and the overtopping of our river and sea defenses.

However, while climate change presents inescapable threats, it also offers opportunities for Guyana to develop and market a whole range of environmental services including services linked to tourism, research and development of our eco-system and a center for the study of our biodiversity .

When I spoke on Independence Day last year, I again set out my belief that the people of Guyana can literally lead the world in forging a new low deforestation, low carbon economy where our national development and combating climate change become compatible objectives. I said then that the people of Guyana would have the opportunity to help shape this vision through nationwide consultations and I am pleased that these will start soon after we launch our draft Low Carbon Development Strategy.

The strategy sets out our vision for sustaining our economic progress in light of the new challenges and opportunities presented by climate change. It draws on our Guyanese insights into how existing development objectives can be accelerated to continue our work to create a socially just and prosperous Guyana, but in a way that simultaneously helps the world devise solutions for stopping tropical deforestation, which is the cause of 17% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

I remain confident that the people of Guyana are ready to play our part – but it is vital that the rest of the world works with us. Our planet is running out of time, and greenhouse gas emissions must peak by 2020 at the latest. That is just over a decade away. It will be impossible to do this unless the historic polluters make significant commitments to cut their emissions and provide the incentives for emerging economies to address their emission levels without compromising prosperity. It would also be impossible to stabilize the planet's temperature without urgent action in forestry starting now given the lead time to introduce clean energy and technology transfer systems.

Our strategy sets out how this might be done, and how with the right incentives, Guyana will avoid gigatons of emissions that would have been produced by an otherwise economically rational development path. These incentives can enable us to realign Guyana's future development onto a low carbon trajectory where we can invest in low carbon economic infrastructure such as the hydro plant at Amelia Falls, open up access to some of our prime non-forested agricultural land such as the Intermediate Savannahs, provide the means for indigenous peoples to access new economic opportunity and protect our people and productive land from the changing weather patterns caused by climate change.

Fellow Guyanese,

We have come a far with since Independence because of the efforts of our people, but much more progress can be made if we have a supportive political environment. Our people's desire for a better life imposes on us the obligation to pursue greater national unity and cooperation

We therefore must seek to implement a framework for improved cooperation between our political parties, particularly the major parties the PPP and the PNCR and to foster engagements that go beyond Parliamentary exchanges and that are more reflective of the enormity of the challenges facing Guyana. While we may not find common ground on every issue and while differences will persist, the need for joint action in response to these challenges must surmount our differences.

Fellow Guyanese,

As we reflect on our successes and challenges of the past, it is important to remind ourselves of the struggles and toils of our fore parents in the fight for Independence and Democracy. They have brought us this far; it is for this generation and the generations to come to continue the journey that would lead to a safe, united and prosperous Guyana, one in which every citizen would be able to hold his or her head proudly and affirm his citizenship to this great land that we call our home.

Love Live a Free and Independent Guyana!

Happy Independence Anniversary!