

Address of His Excellency Donald Ramotar
President of the Republic of Guyana
On the Occasion of
The 47th Anniversary of Guyana's Independence

26 May 2013

Fellow Guyanese,

Forty seven years ago, the Union Jack was lowered for the last time signaling the end of colonial rule in our country and closing an infamous era in our history. As the British flag was lowered, the Golden Arrow Head was simultaneously hoisted for the first time over our land marking the birth of a new nation and a new era for us all.

Independence Day was the culmination of centuries of struggles by our people. Generations of our forbears dreamt of this day. Many paid dearly with their own lives. The slaves battled daily for freedom. Many were felled in the process. The Indentured labourers fought gallantly to improve their lot, and as a result, many made the ultimate sacrifice. Our working people and our national leaders also fought strenuously to end colonial domination. Here too, great sacrifices were made.

Our Independence was constructed around these historic struggles. It is therefore of special significance that this year's Independence anniversary coincides with many important historical milestones. This year as you know is the 250th Anniversary of the 1763 Berbice Slave Uprising. This event rocked the slave system not only in the Guianas but throughout the western world. It signaled the beginning of the end for slavery in our hemisphere. This year we also marked the 175th Anniversary of the arrival of East Indians to our country. This too was a most noteworthy event in our history as their arrival added greater diversity to our nation. In recognizing this date, we are also recognizing the great contribution made towards the struggles for freedom and independence of the Indentured Labourers and their descendants. In a mere two months we will also celebrate the 175th Anniversary of the abolition of slavery in this land and in a large part of our region.

It also marks the 178th Anniversary of the arrivals of the Maderians and the 160th Anniversary of the arrival of the first Chinese on our shore.

Independence Day is a celebration of the innumerable sacrifices made by our ancestors at various periods of our history.

Our Amerindian peoples were the first victims of the colonial invasions and many also perished while others sought refuge in the interior for safety.

Tonight we recall May 26, 1966 and the soaring hopes and intense pride it brought to us as a people. Independence meant that at last we had created the most fundamental condition necessary to pursue the aspirations of those who came before us, those who dreamt of building and living in a free and prosperous country.

The last forty seven years were not always easy, as we pursued these ambitions. We have had to meander through the torrents, the twists and turns; and ride many ups and downs. Shortly after Independence we had to mount a struggle for democracy in our land. This struggle was necessary because democracy is an indispensable condition for the task of nation- building at every level.

Democracy is indispensable for sustained social and economic development. Without it, we would be unable to achieve the great aspiration captured in the motto of our nation, of being "One People, One Nation, One Destiny." The post-independence history of Guyana has proven this adequately.

Over the past two decades, the government has worked strenuously to build our democracy and to entrench our newly found democratic norms and practices in the Guyana constitution, laws and governance.

We have labored to build a strong and resilient economy and improve the quality of the lives of all our people from the deepest south of our nation to the coastal communities. We have repaired our international image and reputation as an emerging democratic nation.

On this the 47th anniversary of our Independence we can proudly hold our heads aloft and say that we are assuredly on a trajectory towards a better future.

Over the past seven years, our economy has enjoyed an unprecedented run of sustained economic growth. Indeed, ladies and gentlemen, over the last seven years we have had an average growth rate of 4.5 to 5% per annum.

This growth path is expected to be maintained in the coming years. And this is not just the government's assessment. The International Monetary Fund anticipates that for this year Guyana will register a 5.5 % increase in its Gross Domestic Product and for next year 6%. The stellar performance of Guyana's economy and the excellent prognosis for the future speaks volumes about the resilience of our economy, the soundness of our economic planning, and the industriousness of the Guyanese people.

The latest IMF's World Economic Outlook reports that Guyana is predicted to see the second highest economic growth for South America in 2014. This is no mean achievement for our country and we should all be proud that we have emerged from the country listed second from the bottom list of countries in the region in 1992 to second highest in 2013!

We should all feel justly elated over what we have accomplished. We have planned prudently and we have carefully but boldly executed these plans. While we must remain vigilant and be sensible in our economic choices, we can find comfort and greater hope in the fact that our international reserves are at their healthiest and our foreign debt is at a manageable level.

Our people are enjoying better days. Thousands of Guyanese men and women have had the great joy of owning your own homes. Through our ambitious housing programme, we have greatly increased the stock of housing in Guyana and relieved the pressures that the shortage of housing had created within families and communities.

We should acknowledge that Guyana is the only country in the CARICOM that has embarked on such an ambitious housing programme focused on housing the poor and low income families. In the last 5 years, 50% of all persons who own a house lot under these schemes are single mothers and women-headed households. This is a major achievement for our women who can begin to break the cycle of poverty and take a more equal position in the society.

The days of dredging water for miles, of keeping children out of school to fetch water is thankfully over and gone forever. Over 90% of our people now have access to clean and reliable water.

There are more and better schools for children to attend. And these investments have yielded dividends. Our education system has been improved at many levels. Over the last eight years our students have distinguished themselves at the CXC and CAPE examinations. In seven of those eight years Guyanese students have topped the Caribbean at those examinations. We also have much to celebrate in our health sector. We have greatly expanded the services offered at state institutions and are partnering with others to improve the delivery of a wider range of services to our people. For the average man and woman the quality of life is indisputably much better today than it ever was.

What is apposite to note here is the fact that we have had these successes in an international climate that was not very favourable to us. The economic crises internationally manifested in the financial turmoil have created serious problems in many small and large economies in our region and further afield.

I am not pretending that everything is rosy in Guyana. I know there are many problems confronting you. While it is true that we have done much to improve the lot of our people, I am aware of many problems that confront our citizens in the towns and in the NDCs across our land. Many village roads need to be repaired and rebuilt. Too many of our drains are clogged up with debris, silt and weeds. The need for increased rehabilitative works on these structures is clearly evident. This is also vital to prevent the flooding of communities during rainy seasons and at high tides. One of the factors that have contributed to the drainage issue is the poor state of sanitation in many communities. Garbage disposal remains a bugbear in almost all the areas on the coast and is fast emerging as a growing concern in many interior communities.

Fellow Guyanese,

I have also heard stories about underpayment of workers. This government has moved decisively to bring an end to such abuse. We first set minimum wages for many categories of workers susceptible to exploitation, and this was followed by the institution of a national minimum wage which will further protect vulnerable workers from abuse and naked exploitation.

If there is any fulltime employee who is earning less than the specified national minimum wage, I ask you to contact our Ministry of Labour. We will investigate your case. I had also promised to address concerns relating to domestic workers. This minimum wage has gone a far way in doing so, since domestic workers are entitled to this minimum as well. We have now set their working time at 40 hours per week. They will now be legally entitled to holiday with pay and all the other benefits that flow from the labour acts.

We are also going to ratify the ILO convention 189, on domestic workers.

From July 1, 2013 some 31,000 workers in security sector, domestic and shop assistant will have a high wage.

We have to work together, all of us- government and citizens; government and the Opposition; government and civil society- to fix our country's problems.

More importantly we have to continue to sustain growth. At this stage of our country's development, sustaining growth requires investment in transformative infrastructure. This will

also allow us to leap-frog development to higher levels that will yield greater and faster benefits for our people.

As you know we are moving to build a Hydro Power Station to provide our citizens with cheap, clean and reliable energy. This is vital in positively transforming our manufacturing and agro processing sectors. This development in turn will create higher paying jobs and challenge our youth to be builders in their own country. The Amalia Falls Hydroelectric Project will also mean significantly cheaper electricity for households.

Fellow Guyanese,

As you may be aware, within the framework of UNASUR, the leaders of South America took a decision some years ago to integrate the infrastructure on the continent. In putting this decision into practice, both Suriname and Guyana have approached multilateral institutions to undertake a feasibility study for the construction of a bridge cross the Corentyne River. Such a bridge will not only increase people-to-people contact and make travel easier but will also stimulate greater economic activities between our two countries.

Guyana is working with another of its neighbours, Brazil on infrastructural integration. A deep water port and a fully paved Linden-Lethem road would allow for Guyanese products to be traded into additional and much larger markets, benefitting many industries through higher export volumes. I am pleased to report that senior-level teams from both countries are working diligently to accelerate the realization of these projects.

Over the years too we have had far better relations with our western neighbour Venezuela. Our trade relations have expanded and we hope to improve on this going forward. Much of the improvement had to do with the visionary leadership of the late President Hugo Chavez and his close colleagues. Chavez was truly a citizen of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Since it is expected that these and other developments will place greater demands on the need to improve local trade facilitation efforts, our government is moving forward on many fronts to reduce the time and cost associated with trade. One of the measures being pursued is a fully computerized state-of-the-art Single Window Automated Processing System (SWAPS). This system is expected to bring major improvements and benefits to traders and citizens alike.

Fellow Guyanese,

We have also intensified the diversification into new economic centers. One of these new hubs of growth is tourism, a sector that holds huge possibilities for everyone in this country. It

remains one of the growing segments of the global economy but it requires investments, significant investments, if it is to take-off. In order to catalyze this sector, we need critical and supporting infrastructure such as an expanded and modernized airport and new hotels like the Marriot. These will give our country world class facilities and move us higher up on the economic ladder.

Fellow Guyanese,

Our tourism product is going to be supported in the next few years by a strong focus in our public sector investment programme on transportation infrastructure. We have many projects in the pipeline and we are actively considering others. At present we are inviting expressions of interest for a new bridge across the Demerara River. On the East Coast of Demerara, we are in the design phase for the widening of the thoroughfare between Better Hope and Belfield. This will ensure a smoother flow of traffic and avoid citizens having to spend long hours getting to and from home. This is a sore problem that also afflicts commuters on the East Bank of Demerara. There, steps are being taken to not only widen the existing roadway but also to construct a major bypass road that will link the East Coast to Diamond with connecting feeder roads at various points such as Eccles and Mocha.

Major rehabilitation works are also needed on the access road linking communities on the East Bank of the Berbice River. We want to build a sturdy and durable surface which is needed to withstand the growing volume of heavy duty traffic in that area.

I also wish to announce that we are keenly examining the possibility of reopening the Del Conte trail via a road link between Parika and communities close to Bartica. When constructed, this road has the possibility of opening up thousands of acres of new lands for agricultural cultivation thereby increasing food production and securing greater economic opportunities for farmers, while providing a much needed road link to areas formerly only accessible by river.

This area is one of the two possible new agricultural frontiers that we are looking at opening up. The other is in Region 9. Already there is a multimillion dollar investment by a Caribbean investor that will boost the production of rice and other agricultural produce in that region.

Fellow Guyanese,

Region 9 is, as you know, where we began stringing the cable that will revolutionize ICT in Guyana. In the world we live in today things are changing rapidly. Science and Technology are the engines behind this rapid change. Developments in these fields are impacting communications and transportation in a substantial way. That is why we cannot afford to be left behind in relation to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

We are therefore taking steps to keep abreast with these developments. We are preparing our children at school and at home to deal with the new technologies of the world. Our One Laptop per Family Programme is ensuring that no one would be left behind in this the information and technological age.

ICT has already had a positive impact on our economy. Over the past ten years some three thousand jobs have been created in the ICT sector. This can grow even more and begin to compete with the other leading sectors in our economy. ICT will also open access to education and other services to people in the remotest areas of our country and to integrate us more into the global economy.

Fellow Guyanese,

As information communications technology deepens our integration in the global economy, we must also learn to do business in new ways. One method that is now often employed is joint ventures, bringing into existence partnerships between foreign and local businesses, and even between foreign capital, local capital and government. These joint venture models can provide resources, knowledge, technology and capacity transfer. They can also become a springboard for development, generating employment and catalyzing further growth in our economy while integrating this economy into global markets.

Fellow Guyanese,

Guyana is proud to be part of the international community of nations. I want to use this opportunity here tonight to say that as Guyana strengthens its relationship with the countries of Central and Latin America, we do not intend in any way to diminish our ties with those countries with whom we have had traditional relations. In fact we want to further strengthen them. We aspire to be a responsible member of the international community and remain wholeheartedly committed to the objectives of the Caribbean Community and the eventual realization of a single market and economy.

Fellow Guyanese,

This Independence Anniversary reminds us that we live in an integrated world that presents many challenges to small developing nations. Regardless of the exogenous challenges that we face and which we will confront in the future , I have no doubt that all Guyanese share the desire for an end to poverty and for us to build a modern country, one defined by democratic customs and in which all can prosper in an environment of peace and unity.

I believe that at this time when our economy is doing better, we are well positioned to move closer towards achieving this vision. We should not let this moment pass; we should not squander this opportunity. I implore all of our political leaders to join me in working to build a grand future for all of our people.

In any society there will be differences of opinions and differences in approaches to various issues. These differences however should not be used as a roadblock to stymie progress nor is to jeopardize Guyana standing nationally, regionally or internationally.

I wish to remind you that even when in Opposition the PPP always put Guyana first despite the differences it had with the then government. That is why we evolved a strategy of Critical Support to demonstrate our determination never to put our country in harm's way even at the most difficult time in the relationship of our parties.

Today too we need to demonstrate this patriotism even when we do not agree on all issues. As you are aware, on May 22, 2013 I decided to take an unprecedented step to send a message to the National Assembly calling on the parliamentary political parties to complete its examination of the Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism (Amendment) Bill so that Guyana would not lose its good standing in the regional and international bodies and therefore be listed as a non-cooperation jurisdiction. I urged that the parties reconvene in the Parliamentary Special Select Committee and bring the Bill to the House on May 28, 2013 with a view to passing it.

Regrettably, this gesture has been rebuffed and the opposition in that committee meeting refused to entertain any date for a meeting before June 12, 2013 disregarding the negative consequences that could follow.

Now is the time for us to show more maturity in our body politics, it is a time to put Guyana first; nothing should be done to jeopardize the welfare of our people and country.

On this the 47th anniversary of that glorious night when our Golden Arrowhead was hoisted for the very first time, I appeal to our political leaders to join me in creating conditions of improved political trust that would allow us to work together, in spite of our differences, to build this country of ours and to make it truly great so that we can take a bigger part in resolving regional and global issues.

I am ready to engage with all stakeholders in pursuit of these goals.

Tonight, I once again commit the government to working towards a brighter future for our motherland, one in which we can all live in peace, freedom, harmony and unity, and one in which our children can enjoy the promise of a fulfilling future.

Long Live the Republic of Guyana!

Happy Independence Anniversary to our Motherland!

Happy Independence to all Guyanese!