

Address of His Excellency Donald Ramotar
President of the Republic of Guyana
On the Occasion of
The 48th Anniversary of Guyana's Independence

26 May 2014

My dear Guyanese, we meet here to celebrate the 48th Anniversary of our Independence, our freedom; and indeed our sovereignty. This date is, without doubt, one of the most important in our country's history. It marks the end of centuries of oppression including slavery, indentureship and foreign domination.

The journey was long and arduous. In the process, it was characterised by valiant struggles and acts of mass heroism, as well as great individual feats. Whether our people were enslaved or bonded as indentured labourers, our peoples' dream was always to be free, to be able to determine our own path of development.

This is, therefore, one of the dates that call for celebration of the achievements of our people; their strength; their bravery; their perseverance; and their sacrifices in the face of a powerful foreign force through the centuries of our history.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

We are marking this anniversary in a world that has grown more complex, more interconnected, but, unfortunately, one which still remains very unequal between the developing South and the developed North.

International relations today are still dominated and determined by a handful of rich countries. Many of the institutions established, particularly the International Financial Institutions, are mostly geared to serve the interest of the most rich and powerful countries. Developing countries have to manage the affairs of their states in a great disadvantageous situation.

This is reflected in the growing inequality in relation to access to resources and the huge income gap between the rich and poor countries of the world.

Today, the richest 85 persons in the world are worth more than the poorest 3.5 billion persons; almost a half of the world's wealth is owned by just 1 per cent of the population; and the bottom half of the global population own less than 1 percent of total wealth. The struggle, therefore, for socio-economic justice and a more equitable world, continues. One of the major issues is the need to democratise international relations.

It is patently evident that the vast majority of countries in the world, and by extension the peoples of those countries, do not have enough influence on international politics and economics.

This situation demands that Guyana continues to build greater solidarity among the developing world, while we work in alliance with those developed countries interested in genuine partnership.

As you are no doubt aware, Guyana took the lead in promoting regional unity. We continue to work tirelessly within CARICOM to bring stronger bonds and integration of the peoples of the region.

While I know many have expressed some impatience with the pace at which this process is proceeding, let us not fail to see the gains that we have made as well. I was heartened to hear at the last CARICOM Heads of Government Meeting, leaders of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia and Dominica, our sister members, saying that last December when they experienced great damage caused by a major storm, that it was other CARICOM member states that first rushed to their assistance and helped to ease the pain that they endured. This is living example of the growing maturity of the nations, and of the region's commitment to regional integration.

We are also seeing that the institutions of CARICOM are growing stronger. Indeed, later this week, Guyana will be hosting the annual meeting of the Board of Governors of one of our foremost regional institutions, the Caribbean Development Bank. This Bank has served our Region with distinction, and we are pleased to welcome the leadership of this important institution to Guyana.

We will continue to work towards greater cooperation and integration. Closer links will certainly enhance the fortunes of all our peoples.

Guyana has, over the last two decades, also increased its contacts with countries on the American continent. We play an active role in major organizations that seek to improve relations among the countries of both North and South America.

We are working in the Organisation of American States (OAS), as well as in UNASUR, MERCOSUR and CELAC.

In recent years, cooperation with countries in the Americas has improved greatly. This is a good foundation, and we need to continuously promote such cooperation and work with countries both in the North and South. This will allow us to broaden our international relations and benefit from wider cooperation.

Moreover, in a wider setting, we are also working with other former colonies to enhance our collective influence on world affairs. This is manifested in our role in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. It is an important forum for us. The ACP was formed to allow us to interact with the European Union in a more collective way. Now we are working to allow it to expand its relations with other countries and blocs of states.

Guyana also takes an active part in the work of the Commonwealth. This body brings together both developed and developing countries and seeks to enhance cooperation between and among them.

Our country has earned the international reputation of being one of the leaders in the fight against climate change and to better prepare the world to confront the challenges associated with it. Needless to say, this is the greatest challenge of our time, and Guyana stands in the front ranks of the struggle even though we play no part in creating this problem. We will continue to work within the framework of the United Nations process towards a global agreement on Climate Change by 2015.

In the process, we have built an important alliance with the Kingdom of Norway. This relationship is now being recognised as a model for other countries to emulate. Recently, Indonesia adopted a similar project to save its forests.

We are also working closely with the international community, mainly the United Nations, the United States and the United Kingdom in fighting international crimes which include the fight against drug dealers, money launderers and other global criminals.

Our work with the international community will become even more intensive as we are confronted with many global issues. Global problems must be solved by governments taking common positions.

These engagements are vital to also promoting the welfare of our own country.

ECONOMIC ADVANCES

Fellow Guyanese, our country has had real consecutive economic growth every year since 2006. This represents the longest period of uninterrupted real economic growth since independence in 1966.

It is no mean achievement. It is one that all Guyanese must be proud of. We must recall that this was being accomplished at a time when the international economy was rocked by a series of international financial and economic crises from 2007. In spite of these negative global developments which impacted on the price for our main exports and imports our country pushed ahead.

Last year the economy grew by more than five per cent.

That figure would have been much greater, but one of the big contributors to the economy, sugar, was experiencing many difficulties since the abandonment of the Sugar Protocol by Europe in 2010, which saw sugar price being cut by 36%.

That the industry survived this and that the country continues to grow in spite of this, demonstrates the resilience of our economy and of the sugar industry.

Growth was experienced in mining. Significantly, we recorded the highest declaration of gold last year. We surpassed the level reached at the peak of Omai's operations here. We have also seen a surge in rice production in which records were also broken. We must congratulate our workers, miners and business men and women for the tremendous contributions they have been making to the expansion and diversification of our economy. Our private sector has made significant achievements in every area of endeavour. Much investments are taking place in mining, agriculture, tourism, commerce and information based technology.

The service sector has also grown steadily. It is making an important contribution to our economic progress.

Over the years we have also seen the massive development in the construction sector. Here is another area for growth.

Clearly we have laid and are continuing to lay a solid foundation for greater and faster progress in the future. To do so, we need to have improved infrastructure.

For us, one of the main impediments to our faster economic growth is the lack of cheap energy. We need this to provide for a strong industrial and processing sector. We need it to add value to much of what we produce today.

We need it too, to ensure that our domestic consumers have cheap and reliable power in their homes.

We need it so that we can reduce the importation of fossil fuel and to be able to save the nine billion dollars we use every year to subsidise electricity charges to our people. I have every confidence that cheap energy will stimulate rapid economic growth and facilitate job creations in every sector.

That is why it was such a national tragedy that our National Assembly did not unanimously support the Amaila Falls Hydro Project last year. It took us four years of negotiations to have reached that stage in 2013 and all of that has been lost. But we are determined to get this project, already we have recommenced the search and opportunities to bring hydropower to our country.

We will also pursue other forms of cheap, reliable and renewable (green) energy in the future. These will include wind, solar and co-generation.

SOCIAL PROGRESS

Our strong economic growth has given us the room to expand our social services to our people. We have achieved universal primary education in our country and we are close to achieving universal secondary education. We are supplying free books and uniforms to all our children in the public schools. From this year, we are providing parents with ten thousand dollars per child in our public schools as a transportation allowance to assist in their travelling to and from schools.

We have built new technical institutes to expand access by our young high school graduates to skills training and thus prepare a larger number of them with the appropriate skills badly needed for the expansion and diversification of the economy.

We are making tertiary education more widely available to more of our people. Very soon the University of Guyana will begin to offer some degree programmes online. In fact I am advised that the largest number of applicants for this new online programme is from Region 9. The use of technology can equalize equitable access by our young people regardless of where they live. The opportunities are immense for their future.

These measures are enhancing our human capital, the most vital requirement for sustained socio-economic progress. As we see, our children have been dominating the top spots at CXC Examination in the region over the last decade.

We have also extended greater services to our senior citizens.

We are one of only two countries in the whole continent and probably the world that has developed a universal non-contributory pension scheme to assist the vulnerable old age population who have achieved pensionable age. Recall too that in 1993 we removed the Means Test and we also increased the pension from \$300 to \$13,126 per month. My dear country men and women we have also vastly improved health services in our society. Today we have built a cardiac ward at the Georgetown Public Hospital as well as a cancer treatment ward.

We and some private hospitals are providing more dialysis services to people in need. We want to expand these services and add more to make them affordable to the public at large. That is the thinking behind the construction of the new Specialty Hospital. Unfortunately, this is another one of the projects that was cut from the Budget by the opposition in National Assembly.

Partly as a result of our greatly improved health delivery and service, life expectancy has improved significantly and infant mortality is at its lowest in our entire history. Compatriots, I know that one of the greatest contributions to families and citizens' sense of security comes when he/she owns his/her own home. Over the years, we have successfully housed thousands of our fellow Guyanese. We have drastically reduced overcrowding and created a better environment for families. The days of squatter housing schemes with poor roads, no water, sanitation and electricity are gone. More women in Guyana own property than ever before and special focus is on single parent headed households. That constitutes a large percentage of beneficiaries in the government housing programmes throughout Guyana. Our housing programme is being adopted by many Caribbean countries as they tackle that problem as well.

Yes, my dear comrades and friends, as a people we have much to celebrate and the momentum we have achieved at the end of 2011 could have allowed us to go even faster in the last two years if there had been greater cooperation amongst the parliamentary political parties in the National Assembly.

As I have mentioned earlier, politics of “no” that have characterized the 10th Parliament is hampering and undermining many important projects that have the potential of accelerating economic growth and enhancing the quality of life of all of our people.

I already mentioned the Amaila Hydro Electric Project and the Specialty Hospital. But there are many others.

How can we talk about developing our tourist market and oppose a Marriot Hotel Project as well as a modern airport and airstrips in the interior? How can we speak of Human Development and cut the money to provide loans to students at the University of Guyana and remove all the monies committed to advancing the transformation of Amerindian Village economies and speeding up their integration into mainstream Guyanese economy?

How can we speak about fighting corruption and Narco-trafficking and refuse to pass the FATF and CFATF compliant Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism bill? And in blocking such a bill coming to the House they have exposed Guyana to being black listed by the international community with all the consequences that will follow. As we meet tonight the Guyana delegation is on their way to the CFATF meeting which will review Guyana on our independence day and all indications are that Guyana will automatically be forwarded for review by the FATF. This means that Guyana will be listed immediately as a country that threatens the global financial, banking and insurance systems and countries will be instructed to take protective measures against Guyana.

What will Guyana gain by these irresponsible and reckless tactics in our body politic? This I believe will have an impact on the collective morality of our nation. These actions threaten the foundations of our freedom and democracy that our fore parents fought so gallantly for.

Over the years we have worked tirelessly to restore and consolidate our new born democracy and embed it in our constitution, laws, institutions and administrations. Our governance architecture has not emerged as a result of a top down approach but arose from a participatory process with thousands of citizens in the regions and civil society bodies including the opposition parliamentary political parties. Our governance structures enshrined in the constitution are unique and progressive. No country in this hemisphere has built in a veto by the leader of the opposition in the appointment of certain constitutional post holders and establishment of service commissions. This was an important ingredient of the constitutional reform process to provide for greater inclusivity. However, the Constitutional Reform Commission never anticipated that these measures would lead to gridlock.

We have emerged as a democratic nation respecting and protecting human rights. These are things that we must guard like our ancestors guarded their dream of freedom and equality. We

must not take it for granted; we must always try to strengthen these rights and we should let those who condemn them, those who abuse them know the harm they are inflicting on our country.

My dear countrymen and women on this our 48th Anniversary, allow me to call on all to take special pride in our achievements and to make a greater contribution to the improvements of our country.

Too often we hear about the litter and untidiness of our surroundings. Here, each of us can play a part in leading by example to make a personal contribution to the appearance of our living and working environment.

I call for a renewed patriotism and nationalism from our political parties. Opposing for opposition's sake and introducing blackmail methods in our politics will gain us nothing; indeed, even if it gives results in the short-term, it will damage the moral fabric of our society in the medium and long-term.

The only criteria should be what is in the interest of our people and country.

As we approach the 50th Anniversary of our Independence let us work in greater cooperation and unity. We still have a lot to do to further enhance the quality of life in Guyana.

Thank you for your attention, and a Happy Independence Anniversary to all.