

THE GUYANA-VENEZUELA BORDER ROW

The century-old territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana, her English-speaking neighbour on the South American mainland, is again in the news.

Considered settled in 1899 under the Treaty of Washington, the border question resurfaced in 1962 as part of an imperialist campaign as the author explains, to destabilise his People's Progressive Party (PPP) Government.

Himself a former Premier of Guyana, author Cheddi Jagan speaks authoritatively on the subject, accusing his rival Forbes Burnham (now Executive President) of having entered into a conspiracy with Anglo-American imperialism and Venezuela. This resulted in the 1966 Geneva Agreement and the Port-of-Spain Protocol, the latter placing in cold storage for an initial 12-year period any search for a solution. The matter has now come into the open as Venezuela refuses to re-new or extend the Protocol.

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by Cheddi Jagan.

Venezuela has once again revved up its claim to nearly three fifths or 50,000 sq. miles of Guyana's territory. Its government has declared that it does not intend to extend the Port-of-Spain Protocol, which ends in June 1982, and opposes the implementation of a US \$2,000 million hydro-electric-smelter project in the area she claims. The Venezuelan Minister of Youth is reported to have led a contingent of youths into Guyanese territory near the border with Venezuela.

The Guyana government has whipped up an almost hysterical campaign on the border issue. Venezuelan actions have been deemed as aggression for the purpose of taking over a vast area, the richest part of the country, and of hindering development. Epithets such as "fascist enslavers, conquistadores, terrorists, bandits" etc. have been hurled.

How real is the threat from Venezuela? Is there a serious danger of imminent military aggression? Is the intended purchase of the sophisticated F16 fighters by Venezuela from the USA, about which the Guyana government has expressed concern, meant for a blitzkrieg attack on Guyana?

The answer to these questions lies in our perceptions of the political realities in Washington, Caracas and Georgetown.

Washington has been seriously perturbed about the decisive shift in the world balance of forces in the post-Vietnam 1975-80 period -- the loss of the former Portuguese colonies, particularly the defeat of imperialism and reaction in Angola; the revolutions in Ethiopia, People's Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan, Kampuchea, Grenada and Nicaragua; the ouster of the hated Patrick John government in Dominica; the progressive military coup in Suriname and the progressive electoral victories in St. Lucia, Aruba and Curacao.

Concerned with these developments, particularly in its own "backyard" (Central America and the Caribbean), the ruling circles in Washington became more hawkish. The closing period of the Carter administration witnessed an attempt to reactivate the cold war and the establishment of the "Rapid Deployment" or "Quick Reaction" Force of over 200,000 men, a Caribbean Joint Task Force, and the carrying out of military manoeuvres at the US military base at Guantanamo, Cuba and the Caribbean Sea.

From Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan, the emphasis has shifted further towards bellicosity.

Those around President Reagan, particularly UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, regard the Carter Administration's policies - emphasis on human rights; ceding sovereignty to Panama of the Canal Zone by the year 2,000; failure to save the Shah of Iran and Somoza of Nicaragua; support for "change", ideological pluralism and "democratic" and "cooperative" socialism -- as inimical to US vital interests.

Emphasis has shifted from poverty as the root cause of political instability in the Caribbean and Central American region to the "Soviet menace", with Cuba as the "agent of Soviet expansionism" and the supporter of "terrorism" in the hemisphere.

Cuba is to be isolated, if not attacked. And pressure is being applied on countries to sever diplomatic and political links with her (in the 1960's, 5 of the 6 Latin American countries severed relations, the exception being Mexico). Venezuela under the last administration of President Carlos Andres Perez, together with Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador opposed the intervention of a US "peace force" into Nicaragua. Today, the Campins administration/is propping up the military civilian junta with military advisers and increased arms supplies by 400 per cent.

/of Venezuela is on the same side in El Salvador as the US Reagan administration, which

Venezuela has also suspended, while Colombia and Costa Rica have severed diplomatic relations with Cuba.

On April 19, 1981, Diario de Caracas, closely associated with the ruling COPEI party, published a document entitled "Problems of War and Strategy in the Caribbean". Mimicking the US psychological warfare propaganda about "Soviet military superiority", "Soviet menace", and "Soviet threat", it refers to "Cuban military superiority" and warns against "aggression by Cuba", and the danger that the Cubans "may block the flow of Venezuelan oil to other parts of the world, either by intercepting the tankers, destroying the refineries, or even wiping out the Venezuelan army and taking over Venezuela if necessary".

It is in this context that the proposed purchase of F16 fighters must be seen. The bourgeois-controlled Venezuelan state, rich with petrodollars, is apparently willing to supplant Brazil as the junior partner, as the gendarme, of imperialism in the hemisphere.

Where does Guyana fit into this scheme of things? Since the end of 1976, when the Guyana economy began its descent into huge, chronic budget and balance of payments deficits, the People's National Congress (PNC) regime of President Burnham under pressure has retreated in domestic and foreign policies. It has moved backwards from its anti-imperialist stance in the 1974-76 period more or less to the vacillating position held on the 1971-73 period when it had close links with China and Brazil. The New Investment Code of 1979 to encourage foreign private capital reversed the policy guidelines of the December 1974 Sophia Declaration, which underlines state control; its stance on Afghanistan and the China-Vietnam-Kampuchea conflict, unlike that in Angola, was in accord with, the position of the United States.

This position was more or less satisfactory to the Carter administration. The Reagan administration, however, reverting back to the John Foster Dulles era (non-alignment is immoral; if you are not with us, you are against us), would prefer Guyana to move to the outright pro-imperialist and pro-capitalist position held in the 1964-70 period. Unhappy about Guyana's anti-Israel and pro-PLO stance in the Middle East conflict, and the position taken in the joint Guyana-Cuba communique signed after the visit of the Cuban Foreign Minister to Guyana in January 1981, US imperialism is most likely behind the Venezuelan threats on Guyana to force it to move further to the Right, to open up the Mazaruni hydro-electric-aluminum smelter project to foreign capital and the transnational corpora-

tions, and to dismantle the state sector by denationalising Guysuco (state sugar corporation) and Guymine (state bauxite corporation) through their transformation into cooperatives.

These imperialist positions are in accord with the geo-political and strategic objectives of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. For many years, they have been clamouring for joint development of the Essequibo region. To concede this would be tantamount to an economic takeover. Accommodation of Venezuelan capital can come about however if the USA succeeds in forcing the PNC regime to include foreign capital in the Mazaruni project. Venezuelan objection to World Bank and other financing for a complete state-owned (Guyana) project for the development of the Essequibo region is nothing new; it was voiced long ago by the Caldera (COPEI) administration after the Port-of-Spain Protocol had been signed in 1970.

The muscle-flexing of the Campins administration must also be viewed in the context of the internal political situation in Venezuela. The ruling COPEI party is relatively weak and unpopular. Faced with severe opposition from jingoistic and militaristic rightist forces and their controlled mass media, the Venezuelan government was forced to abandon a draft border treaty with Colombia. It is also facing elections in 1983; in Venezuela, unlike the USA and Guyana, campaigning begins about 2 years in advance.

For the Guyanese government, the Venezuelan threat, whether by design or accident, was a blessing. It was capitalised -

1. to divert attention from the pressures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF);
2. to improve its image overseas;
3. to whip up support inside Guyana;
4. to divert attention from the wages issue;
5. to use Venezuela as a scapegoat for its failure to implement the Mazaruni project;
6. to expand the military and para-military forces.

Since June 1978 when the first agreement was signed with the IMF, pressures have been applied on the government to solve the grave financial and economic crisis at the expense of the working people. Failure to meet financial ceilings imposed by the IMF led to the termination of the first agreement. A new 3-year agreement was signed in 1979. Production shortfalls in 1980 (bauxite, sugar and rice down by nearly 20%) resulted in failure to meet IMF ceilings. This led to the February 1981 budget with a G\$14 million tax hike on cigarettes and aerated and alcoholic drinks,

and increases in prices of rice (21.4%), electricity fuel charges (142.8%), powdered milk (27%) and water rates (66.5%).

In the second quarter of 1981, the IMF laid down the law. There were serious production shortfalls and heavy indebtedness by the Central Government and the state corporations to the local banking system. Thus, in June with a revised budget, the tax axe fell once again, this time with vehemence -- devaluation of the Guyana dollar (G\$3.03 = US\$1.); reduction of development expenditure; hefty taxation of every conceivable kind. The Venezuela threat was a convenient excuse for the heavy impositions on the people.

The Venezuelan threat has also provided the regime with an opportunity to refurbish its image overseas, which had become tarnished since 1977 as a result of the police frame-up on a murder charge of PPP activist Arnold Rampersaud, the use of the military against sugar, municipal and bauxite workers, the Jonestown massacre-suicide, the murder of Catholic priest Father Darke, the Walter Rodney assassination, the denial of newsprint to the non-government Mirror and the Catholic Standard publications, and the rigging of the 1978 Referendum and the 1981 general and regional elections. Now, it has mounted an international campaign, claiming that rich, powerful Venezuela is pouncing on small, struggling Guyana!

By assuming a nationalistic-jingoistic position, the PNC hopes also to win support and to break out of its total isolation at home.

It hopes too to relieve itself from the pressures from the workers and the TUC for the payment of the G\$14 minimum wage agreed to but not paid in 1979, with adjustments for 1980-81 in keeping with the rise in the cost of living. The workers are being fobbed off -- in 1979, the exhortation was: do you want the \$14 or free education; it changed in 1980: do you want the \$14 or the Mazaruni project; now in 1981: do you want the \$14 or Essequibo? The Venezuelan threat is being used for only a meagre increase in wages, bringing the minimum wage to G\$12.95 per day at a time when the 4 progressive trade unions in the TUC -- Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (GAWU); National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE); Clerical and Commercial Workers Union (CCWU); University of Guyana Staff Association (UGSA) -- have stipulated a minimum wage of G\$27.50 per day.

The PNC regime has also failed to implement the Mazaruni project on which it placed such high hopes since 1968. The World Bank has pronounced that the project will be uneconomic unless there is found a large-scale consumer of excess electricity. Brazil is too remote from the Mazaruni site, and Venezuela is not interested.

And the World Bank has given a \$3 million (US) loan to examine the feasibility of other smaller projects. Venezuelan objection to the project comes as a convenient cover for the government's failure. Thus, Venezuela during the revised June 1981 budget assumed the same role as scapegoat as the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and GAWU, which during the earlier February 1981 budget had been charged with sabotaging the economy.

The PNC regime has built up a huge military and para-military force to maintain itself in power. In 1973, the expenditure for the Guyana Defence Force (GDF) was only G\$10.3 million; in 1974, it jumped to G\$24.7 million, an increase of nearly 150 per cent. In the calculation of the PNC, this became a necessity after the army intervention in the 1978 elections due to the drop in voter turn-out in Georgetown, allegedly a traditional PNC stronghold, from 90-95 per cent in 1964 to 60-65 per cent in 1978.

Similarly, after the rigged 1978 referendum and 1980 elections, the expenditure for the GDF jumped from G\$54 million in 1978 to G\$116.8 million in 1981 (G\$147.8 million for the military, paramilitary and police, \$132.8 million more than the \$15 million spent in 1970).

The Venezuelan threat has become a convenient excuse to justify the huge military expenditure in the face of cuts in social services, onerous taxation, high markups of state-imported goods, wage freeze and wage restraint, removal of subsidies on essential commodities and devaluation of the Guyana dollar.

The border claim by Venezuela is being used as a political football against the vital interests of the Guyanese and Venezuelan peoples. It has been resurrected from time to time (first used in 1962 against the PPP government) to serve the interests of imperialist and other reactionary forces. It is not strange that the Guyana government, in spite of its claim of Venezuelan aggression, has failed to take the issue to the U.N. Security Council, and at the same time to seek the co-operation and support of the Opposition for the mobilisation of the masses.

The PPP warns against any sellout deals and concessions. Guyanese patriots demand that the border issue should not be left dangling like the sword of Damocles over their heads. On the termination of the Port-of-Spain Protocol in June 1982, steps must be taken, as laid down in the Geneva Agreement, to resolve the issue with the help of the United Nations.

NOTES

1. "Reagan once said that the mistake was not that the war in Vietnam was started, but that it was lost" - Fidel Castro, Geneva, Dec. 20, 1980.
2. According to Jeane Kirkpatrick: "The foreign policy of the Carter administration fails not for lack of good intentions but for lack of realism about the nature of traditional versus revolutionary autocracies and the relation of each to the American national interest. Only intellectual fashions and the tyranny of Right/Left thinking prevent intelligent men of good will from perceiving the facts that traditional authoritarian governments are less repressive than revolutionary autocracies, that they are more susceptible of liberalization, and that they are more compatible with U.S. interests. The evidence on all these points is clear enough". (Commentary, October 1979, p.)
3. Reflecting the views in Washington and London, the former French Minister of Overseas Departments in the Valery D'Estaing government charged that "international communism is on the march in the Caribbean and Cuba is the staging post for Soviet action", that Cuba is providing both financial and political aid to Martiniquean dissidents, that "Martinique will stay French whether it likes it or not", and "France is one of the rare countries which is capable of transporting to the Antilles and Guiana in 10 hours a division and a half of crack troops".
4. This was the period when the Nixon administration began to play the "China card" against the Soviet Union, and looked to Brazil to play the role of ideological leader in Latin America (the Brazilian model: "as Brazil goes, so goes the rest of Latin America"), and as a member of the Latin American Peace Force, to play the role of gendarme of U.S. imperialism.
The Guyana government allowed China to set up in 1972 the first "socialist" resident embassy in Georgetown and propagated the Maoist anti-Soviet "two super-powers, two-imperialisms" line; and with the Ramphal-Barbossa Accord in 1970 agreed to facilitate Brazilian expansionism to the North with free port concessions in Georgetown.
5. Terrence Todman, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, stated in June 1977: "Guyana is seeking a different path to social and economic development, one with which we have no quarrel and which we have no reason to fear, Despite its different political philosophy, and our differences of the past, Guyana looks to us for understanding and cooperation. By cooperating with Guyana we can emphasise once again our readiness to respect

different ways of political and social development".

6. Of this period Ted Brathwaite, Guyana's first ambassador to the United Nations, stated on his resignation: "Time and time again I was forced to realise that while I was at the UN pursuing what I considered to be my country's right to intervene in certain political issues, back in Guyana other presences were dealing with those same issues . . ." resulting in his being told "what the American Secretary of State would wish him to do or what posture he would wish him to assume".
7. The Guyana government is pragmatically forced to take a different position from the USA in the Middle East conflict because, firstly, of its need for petrodollars, and secondly, its close links with the Organisation of African Unity, the front-line African states and the African Liberation Movements, which have an anti-Israel position as a result of Israel's collaboration with fascist-racist South Africa.
8. The communique expressed support by Guyana and Cuba for the independence of Puerto Rico, the liberation struggles of the Salvadorean, the Sharan and Palestine (PLO) peoples, the territorial integrity of Guyana, the Nicaraguan people's struggle against destabilisation, and the recovery by Cuba of Guantanamo base and by Panama of the Canal Zone.
9. In the mid-1970's, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and Dr. Henry Kissinger, U.S. Secretary of State had warned against the "automatic majority" in the United Nations. In his address to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January, 1976, Dr. Kissinger had stated: "The hostility of some of the Third world spokesmen and bloc voting have made constructive discussions in the UN forums between the industrial and developing world almost impossible. I have instructed each US Embassy that the factors by which we will measure the value which that government attaches to its relations with us will be its statements and its votes on that fairly limited number of issues which we indicate are of importance to us in international forums".
10. The government has already announced that Guymine and Guysuco will be transformed into co-operatives. What this means in practice was pointed out in 1976 by the then General Manager, Hugh Saul, in relation to the state-owned Guyana Marketing Corporation. He said: "weekly and monthly employees should be allowed to purchase shares to the tune of \$1 a week or \$5 a month as a positive movement

towards ownership and these funds could then be used for further development of the Corporation and relieve the central government of the task of having to pump the scarce public resources into corporations. After all, the Prime Minister, Cde Forbes Burnham, has already said that all corporations and companies are eventually to be owned by the people. The sooner a start is made the better."

In the same vein, Kit Nacimiento, speaking at the Youth Leadership Training Seminar already referred to, said:

"In the immediate terms, the people will have to take control of our natural resources through the state, but eventually this ownership must pass directly into the hands of the people through co-operatives ownership and enterprise.... In this way the distribution of the wealth obtained from the development of our natural resources will flow into the hands of the people".

No doubt, when Guyanese are unable to purchase all the shares, they will be offered to foreign investors on the ground of resolving the corporations' perennial problems of heavy indebtedness to the foreign commercial banks.

11. The rate of inflation was about 20% in 1979 and 1980, and is likely to be doubled in 1981. Real per capita income fell about 46% from 1976 to 1980 -- a wage freeze in 1979, and a wage restraint in 1980 and 1981, with a 5 - 7% increase in 1980, and a 7 - 10% increase from January 1981 and 10 - 12½% from July, 1981.