

Address at the Awards Ceremony for Environment Competitions on World Environment Day

JUNE 5th, 1994

CHAIRMAN, Distinguished Visitors, Prime Minister, Other Ministers of the Government, Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Ladies and Gentlemen, Students

Today we are joining with people the world over to celebrate World Environment Day. This gives us an opportunity to reflect on the effects of human activity on the environment at local, national and global levels.

Here in Guyana, I am pleased to note that we have been observing not only this day but the entire week. I am sure that the activities during Eco Week will contribute significantly to an increase in awareness and participation of broad sections of Guyanese in issues related to the protection of our environment.

Ever since the idea of the United National Conference on Environment and Development was mooted, there was a welcome upsurge of interest in the process of sustainable development. Numerous definitions and explanations have been attempted. But for us the main principle is applicable universally: that the natural resources of our planet must be utilized for the benefit of mankind in such a way that they remain available for future generations, and that in the process of utilization, fullest measures be taken to prevent environmental degradation. Sustainable development is an all embracing process which is centred on human development. There are two major needs which have to be satisfied. One is to use natural resources for the material and spiritual upliftment of all people. The other is to maintain the delicate balance in nature reflected in the various eco systems adorning our planet.

The Government of Guyana has an unwavering commitment to the protection of our natural environment. Towards this end, in the middle of Eco Week, the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) was laid in Parliament. This plan reflects our seriousness to ensure that all areas of activity in Guyana be governed in a responsible manner, with all participants contributing fully to the maintenance of the highest environmental standards.

The NEAP recognises the linkage between economic decline and poverty and between poverty and the environment.

Sometime ago it was mooted that development creates destruction of the environment, but now it is recognised clearly that it is poverty which is endangering the environment. The NEAP states: "The protracted economic decline Guyana experienced in the 1970s and 1980s was accompanied by an intensification of poverty in the society..

"To some extent the standard poverty-environment link exists in Guyana. The most obvious examples are the cutting of trees for charcoal and the reaping of mangroves for household use and cottage industry (tanning). It has also found expression in the way the gold mining industry has developed...

"The more telling poverty-environment link, however, is to be found in the impact of the poverty of the State on environmental degradation. The sharp decline in fiscal viability associated with the economic crisis led to a severe deterioration of the social and economic infrastructure, with grave consequences for environmental health and protection...

"With ever fewer financial manpower resources, the capacity to maintain and expand the social infrastructure eroded. The financial constraints at the Government and City Council levels have, over time, led to a near total collapse of the vital infrastructure for protecting the population from the sea, disposing of waste and providing social services. The evidence of collapse of the social and economic infrastructure is everywhere - in the sea defence breaches and their consequences, the malfunctioning of the drainage and irrigation systems, the breakdown of the management of solid and liquid waste, the deterioration in water supply and electricity systems, the unavailability of affordable housing and consequent rise in squatting."

The NEAP, while paying attention to the sources of environmental problems and the specific manifestations of these, goes a far way in pointing out the measures that are necessary in order to achieve the high levels of environmental protection. The plan also highlights the constraints in pursuing these objectives where it says;

"An effective programme of environmental protection in a country with severe poverty, paucity of data, effective institutions and trained people, and competition for scarce talent from the private sector, will take time to build up. The new Government is currently struggling with intractable social and economic issues and will be unable to design and administer, let alone finance, a complex environmental protection programme without considerable external assistance."

Herein lies our dilemma. We are unable to overcome these hurdles because of the limited finances available.

Meaningful debt relief will allow us to take significant steps to improve our overall ability to develop in a sustainable way.

A clear example is in the forestry sector. Because of the numerous deficiencies of the Forestry Commission, the Government has put on hold a number of applications for timber concessions. These could have been major earners. But the Government has decided work towards the strengthening of the Forestry Commission and the development of clear management plans which the strengthened Commission will have to supervise. This type of commitment on our part needs to be fortified through debt relief which will give us some scope to carry out the task of strengthening the Commission.

The National Environment Action Plan indicates that an Environmental Protection Act will shortly be presented in Parliament. This Act will make provision for the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). It is Government's intention that this body will receive the necessary financial, material and human resources assistance in order to function effectively.

The establishment of the Environmental Studies Unit at the University of Guyana is a very timely development. We wish to thank the European Community for this great contribution. Government will give all assistance possible to strengthen this Unit to enable it to rapidly train personnel for environmental monitoring and enforcement in all areas of activity. Special attention needs to be paid to the training of indigenous people who already have the ground knowledge, which is vital for success.

Through the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, an overall review of the land titles and land rights of the Amerindian people will be made to ensure that they have proper access to natural resources and full scope for development.

The Iwokrama Rainforest Programme is gaining ground. The temporary camp site facilities have been developed and some members of the Interim Programme Management Group have taken up their positions in Guyana. The programme offers great scope for a proper study in a practical way of the sustainable use of forestry resources - a study that can be of immense value to the people of Guyana and the world at large.

The commitment of the Government of Guyana to the protection of the environment has led to the decision to expand the Kaieteur National Park to include the watershed landing into the fall. We are currently considering

proposals to create a protected area in the Kanuku mountains. And on a broader scale, efforts are now being directed to design a system of National Parks and Protected Areas for the country.

Environmental protection is everybody's business.

Its level of achievement depends on the level of participation of all groups in society.

I wish to make a special appeal, firstly, to those who are involved in different areas of economic life. Government is seriously trying to improve conditions to allow for increased production. We are facilitating efforts by big and small entrepreneurs to enter into new areas of production. Each activity has potential for environmental degradation, and monitoring and enforcement are very costly exercises.

I call therefore on all miners, foresters, industrialists and industrial workers, farmers and agricultural workers, artisans, businessmen and consumers to exercise a high level of self regulation in the course of your day to day activities. Your conscious effort will reduce the need for high levels of expenditure on policing efforts. Like the old popular song, I ask you, "Always let your conscience be your guide."

I also wish to appeal to the residents of all communities - urban and rural, coastal and interior, - to take pride in keeping your surroundings clean and beautiful. Community Development Councils, Community Policing Groups and other community organisations and Civic bodies can play a crucial role in ensuring proper systems of garbage disposal and maintenance of clean parapets and clean drains and trenches. Such efforts will in the first place benefit you, your children and those around you. Small conscious actions when duplicated in each individual will bring results of very great proportions.

To those entrusted with the task of protecting our environment, I wish to re-emphasise the seriousness of your responsibility. Government is fully conscious of the limitations in human and material resources and will strive to improve these with maximum speed.

In the meantime, there is much to be achieved through organised links with the various groups in society. Your experiences in the drafting of the National Environmental Action Plan and the preparation of the Eco Fair 94 should serve as a great lesson on the effectiveness of the broad-based consultative and participatory approach.

I wish to congratulate the NGO's, both local and foreign, the representatives of business and trade union organisations, the

professional and social groups and those government officials and individuals who have been working together on environmental issues. Maintain, expand and intensify your collective efforts, for this is the only way in which environmental protection will in the long run be guaranteed.

Effective environmental protection results from several levels of activity. The outer limits lie on the one hand in rigid enforcement and on the other in sound education and public awareness.

Government will insist that wherever necessary, firm actions be taken to deal with violations of environmental laws and regulations. It is hoped that the Environmental Protection Act will update and strengthen these laws and regulations and that the Environmental Protection Agency will deal fearlessly with violators.

Enforcement, however, will be difficult if not impossible without a comprehensive programme of public awareness. It is therefore very heartening for us to be here today to participate in this prize-giving ceremony to honour the winners of the competitions held for World Environment Day 1994. I congratulate all those who participated and I give special praise to those who have been declared winners. I urge you to continue ever onwards. Use all opportunities available, the schools, the print media, the radio and television, to spread the gospel of Environmental Protection.

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