

Cheddi Jagan's Interview with BBC

for 20th Anniversary of Independence

20 wasted years. That would be the most appropriate way to characterise this 20th Anniversary.

This is a potentially rich, but poverty-stricken country. It is bracketted in this hemisphere with the poorest countries, Bolivia and Haiti. In the Caribbean, ^{Guyana was} At the time of the PPP government listed with the MDC's -- the more developed countries; now, it is listed with the LDC's -- the less developed countries.

Every imaginable crisis can be found here : budget and balance of payments, debt payment, foreign exchange, production, fuel, electricity, transport, food. The latest is the fuel crisis.

Fuel supplies from Trinidad and Tobago, to which a debt of about 500 million dollars (TT) is owed, has been cut off.

But not only is fuel in short supply. Practically, everything basic -- water, cooking oil, soap, you name it. And the services have virtually collapsed.

For the average working class family, life has become unbearable. In 1981, the TUC's General Secretary said that the working man was eating one meal a day, and his child was going to school with bare tea in the morning. That was the year when a TUC study disclosed that a worker's take home pay after tax was \$250 Guyana dollars per month, but his expenses were 654 dollars. Since then there has been a rapid deterioration in living standards. Practically every -thing has to be bought in the blackmarket, which is now bigger than the official market.

Alienation, low morale and emigration are the hallmarks of our sick society. Unable to remove the PNC with ballots, the people are voting with their feet. Legally or illegally, in thousands each year, they are going across our borders and to North America.

People are running away in search of freedom from want and freedom from fear. Fear is coupled with force and fraud.

General elections, deemed selections, have been blatantly and massively rigged since 1968. There is no democracy at any level. People's involvement and accountability is minimal.

Lack of democracy, coupled with incorrect economic planning strategy, wrong priorities, political and racial discrimination, extravagance and corruption, has put a brake on production and productivity. That's why production of our main exports is staganting even below levels reached two decades ago.

Never in living memory has Guyana found itself in such a calamitous situation. The socio-economic crisis is deep-seated, and a vicious circle of poverty has developed. In 1984, according to the Minister of Finance, the situation appeared "very daunting" and he could "offer no comforting solution which will allow us to survive and prosper".

I say that the situation is grave, but not hopeless. The remedy for the socio-economic crisis is a solution of the political crisis and genuine mass involvement in decision-making. Guyana urgently needs a people's democracy.

26 May 1988