

EDITED SPEECH BY
HIS EXCELLENCY, PRESIDENT CHEDDI JAGAN'S
AT THE 1994 AMERINDIAN CONFERENCE
HELD AT PRESIDENT'S COLLEGE
ON
MONDAY 11TH APRIL, 1994.

MADAM CHAIRMAN, DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS ON THE PLATFORM, HONOURABLE PRIME MINISTER, MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS, OTHER DISTINGUISHED VISITORS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, STUDENTS:

I am indeed very happy to be associated with this event. I wish to express the Government's thanks to the Amerindian Research Unit of the University of Guyana for initiating this event. Also, to welcome the initiative which has been taken by Futures Fund to bring Amerindians from different parts of the country to meet and discuss issues relevant to their lives.

We all recognise that the Amerindian people have been neglected and generally speaking, they have had a hard life. We in this Government knows this as well as others and I would like just to quote from our election manifesto what we said about Amerindians.

"Today after years of PNC oppression the condition of Amerindians has been reduced to below the subsistence levels. The PPP/Civic Government vows to put an end to the plight and suffering of the Amerindian people. Our policy is to provide accelerated development for Amerindians. We will enable them to take their rightful place as an integral part of the Guyanese nation. To this end, the PPP/Civic Government will establish development projects, upgrade education and training facilities, promote health and housing, protect their cultural heritage to make equal rights for the Amerindians a reality."

I would like to say that we intend to put what we said on that paper before the Elections, into effect. We are not like many politicians who say one thing and do something else later.

Let me say that we are all aware and have heard some of your concerns. Fortunately, you did not mention, as is happening throughout the world, that you want to create a separate nation in Guyana.

Indeed, if we are to follow from the fact that you have nine different tribes or Amerindian nations, you did not call for each one of them to have a separate nation in Guyana too. Because that seems today, in this period of confusion and turbulence, to be the trend if you look, for instance, in that thoroughly devastated country that was the former Yugoslavia.

Let me say that some of the problems facing us today in this world disorder is due to the fact that some were made superior and some were made inferior. Racial/ethnic status and security became a by-product of political, economic and cultural domination and exploitation.

We in this Government feel that if we are to relate to people and if we are to bring about equality then basic to that is the ending of domination, exploitation and oppression. This must be the role of the Central Government and we are committed to doing that. Because there can be no peace, there can be no equality once there is a system of oppression and exploitation; whether this is foreign or national. We are therefore committed to freeing our country from domination and oppression - whether foreign or national. In this regard I hope that you attending this conference, will look at the roots of our problem. Not only our problem in this country, but problems facing people all over the world.

We saw, recently, the shocking events in Mexico where people took to guns to highlight the severity of their problems of land, poverty and hunger. That has a lot to do with involvement.

One of the maxims of domination has been those whom you cannot coerce you must buy. That has also been the policy in our history. In the colonial era and even more recently in the post colonial era, those who cannot have been coerced were bought in order to maintain domination. We had to fight.

There is much to be done to relieve the Amerindian peoples not just from second class status but from their class status. In order to do that we have to look at the roots of our problem - historically and also at the present time. It is good that the University of Guyana is associated through its Amerindian Unit with this event. For we need rational answers to our problems here or in the Region, in this hemisphere or in the world.

Today, man has within his grasp, with the advance of science and technology to create a new humanitarian world order. As one Carnegie Foundation member puts it, to halve hunger by the end of this century and perhaps eradicate it in another twenty five to fifty years.

But what do we find? More and more poverty, hunger, homelessness, people living in the streets, delinquency and diseases. As a result, it behoves us all, whatever our ethnic or racial group to try to find answers to universal problems and then to relate these to our own situation. If not, as I just pointed out, we will soon have people asking for separate nationhood. And not only separate nationhood based of one ethnic group, but even based on religion or language. This is not necessarily going to be the answer.

Owning a piece of land or a country, even though you may exercise sovereignty over it, the present trend indicates that, this can be meaningless when one looks at the power which is today manifested by a few hundred multinational organisations over the lives of peoples and nations. Therefore, let us see how science and technology can be harnessed in the service of man. Not to create problems, but to alleviate problems.

If we are to do this, then our academic people not just the politicians, have to come up with answers. Because we politician, as I said in Jamaica, when I addressed the Annual Conference of the ruling PNP, we politicians tend to look not beyond our noses. We are always concerned about the next election and tend to be pragmatic and opportunistic and forget principle and policies. We have to look at things on a long term basis and sometimes, therefore, we can use the academic community; those who are not selling their souls but who are willing to be progressive and revolutionary and to speak out without fear or favour.

So far as you Amerindian people are concerned, let me say that under this Administration there will be no coercion or bullying and you will be asked to work more meaningfully in trying to build the solution to your problems.

As you are aware, we are in a difficult situation. Not only your communities but other communities in this country, face many serious problems. Problems of poverty, hunger etc.

Our problem as a Government is that eighty percent of the hard-earned money that we collect as revenue have to be used for the payment of debt; debt which has accumulated over the years and which therefore puts us in a position where we cannot pay people a decent, living minimum wage. Where we do not have enough to spend on education and health and other essential things like housing. We had last year to cut extravagance in Government administration, for example at the Presidential Secretariat and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to get enough money to put in the vital sectors of social services - health, housing and education. Also to increase expenditure from a minimal of only eight percent to 14 percent of Government budget expenditure.

This is why two weeks ago I wrote to the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund Mr. Camdessus asking how we are to get economic growth necessary to educate our people, to provide the social services and other things if we cannot get substantial debt relief as a matter of urgent priority. If we do not have enough money to pay people decent wages and salaries, to educate our people, to get them to get proper nourishment so as to be healthy, to live in decent surroundings, how can we have growth to pay our debts and to eradicate poverty and hunger.

Therefore, central to what we must do in this country, is a national effort along with others who are in a similar plight as ourselves, to see that our debt burden is reduced substantially. I reminded Mr. Camdessus that some years ago, eleven Latin American countries met at a conference at Cartagena and reminded him that at that conference it was decided that debt payment in relation to export income should not be more than twenty percent. Ours is over sixty percent.

More recently, more than 47 of the Least Developed Nations of the world according to the Organisation of African Unit have said the debt ratio, that is the debt payments in relation to foreign income, should not be more than ten percent.

Our debt payment is two times the average for those Least Developed 47 foreign countries. Therefore our debt payment gap should not be more than ten percent. It is this battle that all of us including you Amerindians must get involved in. For unless we solve that problem then we cannot solve your problems as quickly as we would like.

Now to some of your problems. You referred to some of them; the Amerindian Act, Land Titles and areas of land which you should have. These matters, I hope, will be addressed very quickly and not addressed from above, but with your involvement. We do not see Government from above. We want governing from below; from the grassroots.

In this regard we have said that we want not just representative democracy, but participatory democracy when people must not only have government which they elect periodically, but are in a situation where they participate every waking moment of their lives to champion their own affairs.

We have heard complaints before about rigged Amerindian Elections. Well we have had rigged elections for many years. Fortunately in October 1992 we have had free and fair elections for the first time in twenty eight years. Soon we hope to have free and fair elections in the villages and municipalities - elections which were rigged were last held in 1970. We hope to see that all Amerindian villages must have free and fair elections as soon as possible. But more than this, we want you to be directly involved.

Recently, while in Kamarang to visit certain areas I found that many of the villagers did not know anything about the development budget. They were not properly and adequately consulted. They did not participate in the making of that budget. We have to quickly change all of this.

You mentioned questions like encroachment on your land where people are coming in and abusing your facilities, your rights as Amerindian people and also some of your other rights. You mentioned the pollution of your rivers, the destruction of your environment. It is not enough to complain. I want to tell you that you must be part and parcel of the policing apparatus. We do not have enough money and resources available in the 'Gold Mining Commission' or the Forestry Commission, or personnel and boats to police the vast interior.

I say today, organise yourself in villages and work closely not only with the police, army and the security forces, but also with the Geology and Mines Commission and the Forestry Commission and start to protect your own rights. In doing so, this Government will give you all the help it can.

Because we are not only interested in improving material conditions to give you more food, better housing and other material things. We are also concerned with environmental factors that we should have clean air to breathe and clean water to drink. These are just as essential as the food we eat and you must not only complain but must do all you can to see that this is so. We in this Government through the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and through the Ministry responsible for interior affairs and the regional administration, will ensure that your voices be heard in these various areas.

I want to hope that we in this country do not go the way others are going today - the way of turmoil, ethnic violence, racial violence and tribal violence. Let us hope that we will avoid what happened here in the sixties when we had racial violence. That experience taught us that is not the right way to solve our problems.

This government will work with the international community, with the aid donors, with organisations such as Futures Fund, SIMAP and others to create a situation, where we will be able to tackle the bigger questions and bring about national and social liberation. We will work with you directly and meaningfully and you shall be involved in a participatory democracy to ensure that not only your rights are protected, but that you have a clean environment. You Amerindian people have a great deal to teach the world.

Today the world is splitting apart. Instead of having a New World Order as former US President Bush said at the end of the Gulf War, we have now a new world Disorder.

You the Amerindian people have many qualities unlike the hurly burley of the metropolitan cities in the North and South and perhaps you can teach the world a great deal on how to live with nature and not to fight against it, not to exploit it, but how to live at peace with it.

You also can tell the world about community cooperation, because you have a history of cooperation. We do not say that man is not an individual and must not look after his individual interest. But no individual interest can be attained if the interest of the community and the society is not protected. We hope that with your history of cooperation and community that we can learn a great deal.

Science and technology have developed to the extent where it is possible to eradicate hunger and poverty. But because of selfish individualism striving to acquire more wealth and more power the incidence of corruption and bribery exist. We do not see this as the way to go forward and build a safe and sane world. Therefore, we will work with you to remove some of your problems. We ask for your understanding of what this Government has inherited and your patience to see what are our limitations and that we have constraints just like you. But let us work together to see that you will set an example to the rest of the Guyanese people and to the rest of the world on how to live in amity and peace.

Thank You.