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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
CARIBBEAN CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION
August 23, 2994.

Address by
His Excellency Dr Cheddi Jagan
President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana.

On behalf of the Government and People of Guyana, I bid a special welcome to our country to all participants of the 28th Annual General Meeting of the Caribbean Conservation Association.

You are meeting in a very exciting period of environmental development in the Caribbean. The Global Conference of Small Island Developing States which was held in April/May of this year provided an opportunity for a sharing of views on several important questions related to the sustainable development not only of island states but of developing countries as a whole.

The road to SIDS was very instructive for our Caribbean countries. After much discussion, we were able to work out a common regional position. This was later developed into a unified position of the AOSIS countries which gained the full support of the Group of 77 and China.

The negotiations which followed were very difficult. The needs of the developing countries though clearly and strongly expressed were not readily addressed by the developed world. The result is that the Final Agreement of SIDS presents a very comprehensive picture of what is required for the movement towards the sustainable development of our developing states but fails to identify a full commitment by the developed countries to give the levels of assistance which are necessary for us to achieve our objectives.

Two major lessons are obvious. The first is that whatever gains we made resulted from the high level of unity displayed by the developing countries. Without that unity, the concessions we got would have been much less. We must therefore recognise the need to maintain the greatest unity in our approach to all questions of a global nature.

The second lesson is that there is a limit we should place on our expectations of assistance from the developed countries. For several reasons, the levels of aid will not be any way near to what our countries need. We therefore have to look among ourselves to help one another.

Our Caribbean region must begin in a very serious way to pool our resources, carry out common exercises and give support to each other in our struggle to cope in a highly competitive world market.

I have pointed out before that less than 10 per cent of the imports of all CARICOM countries are bought from within the region. Market forces and recognition of individual tastes should be given a regional flavour. In a Caribbean where tourism is dominant and where furniture is a major input, why

should most of these be brought from outside when Guyana, for instance, can satisfy all the furniture needs of the region at a very high quality? We have a similar situation with food and beverages.

Sustainable development of the countries of our region is based on several conditions being met. What these are and how they apply in specific cases is the subject of continuing debate. In the course of this debate critical dilemmas are emerging.

In Guyana, a deep socio-economic crisis had developed in the latter part of the decade of the seventies. This was characterised by huge budgetary and balance of payments deficits. Agreements with the International Monetary Fund have placed strong requirements on the government to ensure that certain measures of economic growth are maintained.

To maintain a growth of the economy at a rate of 6 per cent per year, new investments have to be encouraged on an ongoing basis. Guyana's greatest potential for growth lies in the forestry sector. Investors are knocking at our doors. But lending agencies and potential donors have made clear their disagreement with an expansion of our forest sector because of the weakness of our administrative, monitoring and enforcement agencies.

The Guyana Government is committed to the ideals of sustainable development. We are not prepared to allow anyone to ravage our forests. We are working to improve our capacity to protect our environment. But to do so we need resources - human, material and financial.

Our fundamental problem is financial. The present administration inherited a foreign debt of over 2 billion US dollars. About 75 per cent of our current revenues go towards foreign and local debt payments. Very little is left for development needs.

Discussions with International institutions for assistance in various fields have yielded and are yielding some results. However, the extent of such assistance will not allow us to decisively to break out of the vicious circle in which we are entrapped.

We are therefore preparing a more dynamic programme which will seek to supplement the assistance from international lending and donor agencies with direct payments from investors for the strengthening of administrative, monitoring and enforcement agencies in the natural resources sector.

The dilemma of countries like Guyana requires that maximum support be given to the efforts of these countries by regional and national organisations. We look to the Caribbean Conservation Association to play a critical role in mobilizing Caribbean public opinion in support of our efforts for debt reduction and write-offs.

I was highly impressed at the SIDS conference with the role of the NGO's which was co-ordinated by the Caribbean Conservation Association. The NGO's made very vocal demands for a people oriented programme. I fully agree that development in the first place is about

people and sustainability parameters must always be considered with people's welfare as the top priority.

So long as the debt burden continues, people's basic needs cannot be met. And as we are seeing all around us, poverty is a major cause of environmental degradation.

If money cannot be found for the creation of respectable living wages and essential services, it is hardly likely that budgetary allocation can be made for projects to protect the environment. It is therefore a necessary condition for effective environmental protection that countries be free of the strangulation caused by their massive debt payment requirements.

For the sake of genuine sustainable human development, a crusade must be launched for the removal of the debt burdens of developing countries. And I wish to call on the Caribbean Conservation Association to take an active lead in this effort in the Caribbean.

With our limited resources, the region needs to tackle environmental issues in a collective way. The University of the West Indies, the University of Guyana, the research institutes, professional bodies and NGO's need to cooperate meaningfully by sharing experts and experiences for the mutual benefit of all.

The region has within it an abundance of skills. They need to be properly harnessed and made to work for the good of the Caribbean people.

In Guyana, in spite of our difficulties, we are making a strong effort to protect our environment. The National Environmental Action Plan was approved by the Parliament in June. The Environmental Protection Act is expected to be placed before Parliament when it resumes in October and immediately after its passage, the Environmental Protection Agency will be established.

We shall require assistance in many areas and we look forward to the Caribbean Conservation Association and other institutions and the experts in the region to support us in our efforts.

Caribbean participation will also be expected in the Iwokrama Rain Forest Programme. It is likely that by the end of this year, a medium-term programme would be adopted and the research programmes would be clearly identified. We look forward to a significant Caribbean participation in this very valuable international programme.

The road ahead is a hard one for the Caribbean people. But we can reduce the pressures by our collective efforts. Let us face the future with unity and determination.

I take great pleasure in declaring open this 28th Annual General Meeting of the Caribbean Conservation Association.

Office of the President
Georgetown.