

NEW HOPE FOR OUR AMERINDIAN PEOPLE

By Observer

The treatment of indigenous peoples all over the world has been of great concern to human rights activists and humanitarians. The history of treatment meted out to them whether in our Americas or elsewhere has been one of cruelty and insensitivity.

In Guyana our Amerindian population comprises nine tribes in scattered villages in the hinterland and riverain areas. For decades theirs has been the story of neglect and sufferings.

Under the former PNC regime, they were invariably treated as outcasts from society, as "children of the forests" and as third-class citizens.

This sad story of shabby treatment has now come to an end. In the past four years attention has been paid to almost every Amerindian settlement in the most remote parts of Guyana. President Jagan himself has made visits to Amerindian communities, some of whom have never before seen a Head of State in person.

President Jagan has taken under the wings of his Office the Minister of Amerindian Affairs, a Permanent Secretary for Amerindian Affairs and a specialised Amerindian Unit. This is an unprecedented development. In addition, an Amerindian Advisory Council has been formed at the instigation of the President, and a Fund for Amerindian Development is being commissioned.

These measures are intended to boost efforts towards the accelerated development of Amerindian communities. In the recent 1997 State Budget resources have been allocated to undertake demarcation of Amerindian land, to settle once and for all the thorny question of Amerindian land title on which there has been so much foot-dragging.

In this regard the PPP/Civic Government has moved Amerindian development away from decades of lip-service and rhetoric. In the regions where Amerindians reside direct government funding totalled some G\$160 million between 1994 and 1996. This year a sum of G\$110 has been set aside for Amerindian issues.

Besides, Amerindian communities continue to benefit from programmes negotiated with state agencies such as the Basic Needs Trust Fund and the Social Impact Amelioration Programme, as well as from UNICEF, UNDP, IDB and the European Union.

Because of the nature of Guyana's terrain, Amerindian villages have been at peril of being cut off from communication. The state-run Guyana Airways Corporation (GAC) had made attempts to service many interior locations with scheduled flights but the service had almost come to a halt under the previous

administration. Many of the airstrips have been neglected and abandoned. However, all this is changing and GAC is now servicing 18 interior locations with some 36 scheduled flights per week.

It is expected that with a reduction in the tax on aviation fuel for private aircraft that fares for interior commuting would be reduced, and private planes would undertake scheduled as distinct from chartered flights at affordable fares.

Apart from regular flights, a ferry service from Charity in the Pomeroon to Moruka has been put into operation, and Amerindian residents in Orealla and Siparuta can now ply the Corentyne River on a state-provided passenger-service launch to Guyana's easternmost town, Corriverton.

Multi-faceted development of Amerindian villages has resulted in a campaign to move away from subsistence farming. For this modern technology is required. Through direct assistance, government has provided some areas with chain-saws, tractors, and out-board engines to assist this process of bringing Amerindians into the formal market economy.

Tremendous efforts are being made to develop and preserve Amerindian culture and traditions, while at the same time helping to integrate our "first people" into the mainstream of Guyanese society. A new short-wave radio has been commissioned and Amerindian villages can tune in to programmes, including dedicated and credible Amerindian programmes, on radio sets provided free of cost by the government station.

At the moment samples of this radio have been distributed to some villages, but in time all villages and their schools would be provided with their own sets. In addition, in the Rupununi a pilot scheme is underway to take video films to the villages on what is termed a mobile cinema.

Much attention has been given to the rehabilitation of Amerindian hostels. The Amerindian residence in Georgetown was repaired and refurbished at a cost of G\$6M. The Residence has also been provided with a vehicle to assist in their transportation of patients to and from the Georgetown hospital, and for emergency cases.

Shortly, a Portable Sawmill will be transported to Region 9 where it will be beneficially used for the entire 28 villages in the North, Central and South Rupununi.

This year special attention will be devoted to intensify training of Amerindians in surveying, forestry, and teaching, and to promote arts and crafts of the Amerindians through a market network in the Caribbean.

Yes, Amerindians have been restored to a place of pride in Guyana under the PPP/Civic Government. They know that in many ways. The most important is in the area of education. For example, more young Amerindian students are given scholarships to attend secondary schools in Georgetown. This year 35 young students from the interior locations are attending the once exclusive President's College; 5 are attending the University of Guyana through loans provided by the state; 9 are at Carnegie School of Home Economics; 12 are at Government Technical Institute and at the Guyana School of Agriculture; 4 are at The Burrow's School of Arts; and approximately 152 are attending Secondary schools in Georgetown, and on the coast.

Additionally, history has been made in providing sound secondary education in Amerindian areas. There are secondary schools at Mabaruma in the North West; St. Ignatius in Central Rupununi; and Santa Rosa in Moruka. Very soon a secondary school will be built at Annai in the North Rupununi, and one at Waramadong in Upper Mazuruni.

The Amerindian communities have historically been ravaged by diseases. Malaria is a scourge, and the neglect under the former regime has had a terrible impact on Amerindian communities. But considerable improvements have taken place recently in the areas of health care and health delivery in the interior.

Doctors can now be found in Hinterland hospitals for the first time. For example, although there was a hospital in Moruka since 1984, there has never been a doctor stationed there until this administration came into office. In 1994, a doctor was provided for the hospital full-time after the much neglected buildings were rehabilitated. In addition, over the last four years several "health huts" were built in remote regions.

The over-all national objective, according to Government, is to ensure that Amerindian communities in the interior continue to improve their quality of life. This is being achieved, though the journey to bring a new ray of light to our Amerindian people would necessarily be a long one.