

Poverty - a world scourge

by Janet Jagan

Poverty is a worldwide problem and few nations exist without that scourge. Poverty manifests itself in many ways and in various degrees. In some nations, even the most wealthy, poverty exists in urban slums, homelessness, hunger and disease and is manifest in high levels of crime, inequalities and discrimination. In other countries, it is plain hunger and death from lack of food, lack of medical aid and lack of a roof over the heads of families.

In Guyana, we have had poverty for the last three centuries, arising out of the colonial system of slavery and indentureship. Poverty grew to tremendous proportions during the regime of the PNC. About 76% of the country's population lived below the poverty line up to the advent of the PPP/Civic. Whether they like to see the statistics or not, those hostile to the PPP/Civic government cannot shut their eyes to the bare facts that today the level of poverty is below 35%. But, of course, 35% is still a high figure and one that has to be reduced considerably if we are to have a just society.

There is in operation a Government Poverty Reduction Strategy paper approved by the international financial institutions to assist in the further reduction of poverty. This is ongoing and, hopefully, should lead to a marked

reduction in poverty.

In Guyana, there are other factors that ultimately lead to poverty reduction, like the housing programme which focuses on low income housing; the improved health facilities and protection of the young through pure water supplies, vaccinations, free distribution of milk, improved education and special courses to provide skills to young people, to name some of the more important. Of course, the sharp reduction of inflation and the steadying of the cost of living as well as the agricultural policy which provides an abundance of local food products also help to ease poverty.

Of course, we are not alone in our problems of poverty. Even the wealthy USA faces its problems of hunger and homelessness which increased in 2003. A recent Reuter report indicated that the growth was so intense that social service organizations were unable to meet emergency demands for food and shelter. This was confirmed by the US Conference of Mayors. The Conference's annual survey of US cities found that requests for emergency food assistance increased by 17% while the demand for emergency shelter rose by an average of 13%.

The Conference Chairman said that cities did not foresee any improvement in 2004, despite a recent improvement in the national economy. Some of the causes listed in the report included unemployment or low paid jobs which did not pay enough to provide for their families, lack of

affordable housing, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse. Stated the Report: "About half the homeless population is black, 35% is white and 13% Hispanic. People remain homeless for an average of five months - though many have lived on the streets for years."

According to Time Magazine (Nov, 17, 2003) 40% of the proportion of US wealth is held by the richest one percent of Americans. By contrast, in the UK, 18% of the proportion of wealth is held by the richest one percent of Britons.

In other countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, poverty is high, while, similar to the above statistics; a small percentage of the population holds an over-large proportion of its wealth.

According to recent studies by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean - 44% of the population do not have enough money to cover their basic needs.

Poverty and disproportionate wealth are the scourge of this world. While large segments of the world population die of hunger and disease, other large segments live below the poverty line, suffering malnutrition, disease and homelessness. As Dr Cheddi Jagan said over and over again, we need a new global human order to erase inequalities and bring a balance to life, so that in this world of plenty, all can exist.