

Opening Address by Her Excellency, President Janet Jagan at the 4th Caricom-Central America Ministerial Meeting At Le Meridien Pegasus Hotel, Georgetown, Guyana, 22 March 1999

Mr. Chairman, Secretary-General of CARICOM, distinguished Foreign Ministers of CARICOM and Central AMERICA, Members of the Cabinet, Members of the Diplomatic corps, distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of the Government and people of Guyana, I bid you a very warm welcome to Guyana. I trust that your deliberations will be fruitful and that the results will prove to be beneficial for on-going co-operation between the Governments and peoples of CARICOM and Central America.

Guyana has been in the forefront of the integration movement in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Today our vision embraces ideas of greater union among the nations of this hemisphere given the global realities. It is important that we seek higher and higher levels of co-operation in fostering development and find ways of minimising marginalisation of smaller and vulnerable economies - a challenge current globalization trends present.

I am aware that this meeting was originally scheduled for October of last year, but because of the disaster unleashed on Central AMERICA by Hurricane Mitch, a request was made for a postponement to a later date. That time has finally come, and we are very happy to have all of your distinguished Foreign Ministers in our company.

The severe tragedy that struck the Central American countries, particularly Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, has indicated clearly to all Governments of the Americas that there is a dire need to rapidly co-ordinate and mobilise assistance to countries hit by natural disasters. This issue was raised by Guyana at the Organisation of American States since late last year, and we are happy to note that the hemispheric body is now taking steps to set up an Inter-American Committee on disasters which will be responsible for doing so.

This catastrophe resulting from Hurricane Mitch, and also earlier by Hurricane George in the Caribbean, has caused people all over the American continent to mobilise efforts to render assistance. The expressions of solidarity we have witnessed in the provision of assistance are clear manifestations that the nations of the Americas are growing closer to each other and are willing to synchronise anti-disaster plans.

While we contemplate co-ordination of efforts to deal with natural disasters there are other important strategic issues on the front burner. As we move into the next century, we have to recognise the reality that developing countries are extremely vulnerable.

Mr. President, as we have become painfully aware, threats to our environment also impinge on our peace and security. Global warming and climate change have increased the vulnerability of small states like Guyana to a wave of natural disasters. The El Nino phenomenon recently inflicted on our country a period of intense drought, taking a heavy toll on our economy.

In our continuing efforts to develop our country and meet the needs of our people, especially those living in poverty, my country remains dedicated to the preservation of the environment and the sustainable development of our resources. We are concerned therefore that when we seek to exploit our forest and other resources for the benefit of our people, we face criticisms by those who accuse us of disregard for the environment. We have institutionalised arrangements to ensure the conservation of our natural resources. Moreover, under the Iwokrama Rainforest Project, we have set aside almost a million acres of these forests for research by the international community into the preservation of bio-diversity and the sustainable use of forests.

Countries of the Caribbean and Central AMERICA have put in place programs for disaster preparedness, but these involve, in the long run, much resources which have to be pumped into town planning systems, the purchase of emergency equipment, improved building designs, environmental protection, and even increased agricultural production to stockpile in case of a disaster such as a hurricane.

Our countries generally do not have available resources to do all these. Now, with some countries of our hemisphere literally wrecked, the multilateral financial institutions have to seriously consider the cancellation of these countries' debts, thus enabling them to have more available financial resources for rebuilding.

It is obvious that countries of our region also need human resource assistance in times of crisis.

Currently, the countries of the hemisphere give support to the White Helmets, an Argentine initiative backed by the OAS, the Summit of the Americas process, and the United Nations. However, this unit sends mainly medical volunteers to countries affected by disasters and it is definitely not geared to co-ordinate and mobilise assistance for large scale operations. In 1994, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, the late President of Guyana, proposed the establishment of a Corps of Development Volunteers to supplement the work of the White Helmets. These skilled volunteers - in various fields of expertise - would be recruited from all over the

American continent and deploy to countries in need of assistance. The Miami Summit agreed in its Action Plan for the establishment of this Corps, but unfortunately, this has not yet been reflected. In light of the problems created by Hurricane Mitch in Central AMERICA and Hurricane Georges in the Caribbean, the need for these volunteers is now of paramount importance.

We are all convinced that the increased discharge of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is the biggest cause of global warming and the savage violence of the resulting hurricanes. But while we debate over what countries should do to prevent global warming, the resulting weather-induced natural disasters continue to occur.

Added to the problems caused by nature, the global financial crisis is also having a negative effect on our economies. In the case of Guyana, last year we had the misfortune of having setbacks caused by a severe drought which decreased agricultural production, and also a decline in the prices offered for our exports, including rice, gold and bauxite. The rippling effects

of the Brazilian financial setbacks reached our shores and pressures have been placed on our currency. Political disruptions have only assisted to compound the economic problems and threaten investor confidence.

It must be of some concern to us that smaller economies are treated differently from others considered to be more central to the world economic system. These countries have attracted massive injection of aid to prop up their economies. But we note that the smaller economies like those in this hemisphere have not been treated with such fraternal concern. Vice-President Al Gore of the United States at the recent World Economic Forum drew this to the attention of the world and urged assistance for the smaller and weaker economies.

We need a new dispensation in the arena of world politics and economics. The smaller economies are not begging for handouts. We are merely sounding warning signals that the root causes for social and political upheavals continue to prevail and can be removed. We must work together for a better understanding of our special circumstances. And we have to prove by example that we are committed to the development of our people's well-being. If we do not show solidarity in times of difficulties, then the wider world will show us none. The banana issue in the Caribbean is a case in point. The position of the Caribbean States as regards this matter will cost the industrialised countries nothing, yet we witness a lack of sympathy for the implication to the economies and people of these countries. It is an example of the deep contractions inherent in the present system and the weak positions of smaller economies.

No doubt, problems that we have been experiencing are not unique, and we all have to work together to find solutions to economic problems that we are facing. In this respect, I am pleased to note that Guatemala has proposed that as part of the Foreign Affairs Ministerial dialogue at the OAS General Assembly to be held in Guatemala City in June, discussions should centre on the effects of the global financial crisis on the Region. In supporting this initiative, I suggest that discussions and dialogues on this issue should also take place among other Ministers at the hemispheric level, and also among institutions and civil society in all our countries. Through such discussions and dialogues, constructive suggestions on stemming the negative effects of this crisis can be generated.

I note that as part of your agenda, you will be discussing a proposal for a strategic alliance between the Caribbean and Central America. The streamlining of such an alliance is definitely needed, especially at this time in the development of world history when we are seeing a growing regionalisation trend. The countries of Central America and the Caribbean are all small economies with similar economic problems, and common and united efforts by all of us can help to solve the issues that confront us.

Currently, we are all working together for the establishment of the Free Trade Area of the Americas, expected to be established in 2005. With the problems of globalization and the peculiarities of smaller economies confronting all of us, we certainly have to make serious adjustments to enter into the vast markets which will be thrown open by hemispheric free trade.

The big question is: are we ready? Are we in a position to retool our institutions to meet the demands of free trade? When we consider that our region is disaster-prone and at the same time economically weak, we have to agree that for free trade to work for us, economic assistance is necessary to put us on a level playing field with the larger economies of the hemisphere. At the present time we have to admit that we all have severe limitations in competing fairly in a free-trade environment. This fact is now clearer than ever. We need assistance in improving our infrastructure and productive base. Our proposal for a Regional Integration Fund to meet the needs of the smaller economies of the Americas lies on the table. In the light of the economic problems being experienced by our countries today, the necessity for having it becomes even more relevant.

Mr. Chairman, I take pleasure in welcoming you and opening this important meeting for another special reason. Today, March 22, marks the 81st Birth Anniversary of my late husband and former President of Guyana, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, as you well know he has made a lifelong contribution to the development of the region and it was his dream for us in the hemisphere to realise greater levels of integration.

His vision continues to guide us. In his advocacy of a New Global Human Order he underlined the need for countries of the south to move closer together and for North-South cooperation to deal with fundamental problems of the world today. He was motivated by the great developments in the field of science and technology which affords us the opportunity to give the world's population a decent living standard. I want to leave you with a few of his words from an unpublished paper which was prepared to be delivered at York University, Canada, just before he passed away.

I Quote: "While all our countries are individually searching for more aggressive and innovative ways to cope with the growing inter-dependence and globalization taking place, there are fundamental issues which can be addressed only by new global initiatives. It is clear that if present world-wide trends continue, tensions, conflicts and disorders of potentially disastrous consequences could become the order to the day.

Disaster can be avoided. As an adjunct to the UN Agenda for Development, Guyana has been advocating a New Global Human Order which must have as its goal, human development: meeting the basic needs of the people; cultural upliftment and a clean and safe environment. The proposal is founded expressly on the requirement for guaranteeing to every woman, man and child the rights, respect and recognition that have been so well underscored by international agreements; for ensuring effective, democratic, accountable and transparent governance, gender equality and empowerment of women, reduction of mortality rates for infants and children, primary health care systems to reproductive health services for individuals, diminished prevalence of disease, environment sustainability and regeneration, and basic capacity building for efficiency and effectiveness, for combatting the environmental degradation; for attention to the root causes of poverty with diametric reduction by the year 2015 for securing the physical and material well-being of people through economic growth and development; and for facilitating these objectives through a global partnership that assures support for their attainment.

"It is relevant to note that Science and Technology today has within its grasp the ability, if properly harnessed, to cut hunger in half within a few years. But this will require a sound scientific development strategy, wider intellectual understanding, strong political will, deeper moral commitment and effective policy measures - a balanced and integrated set of economic, financial and social policies. There is an inter-connection and interaction between the economic, political, institutional, ideological, ecological, social and cultural spheres.

"We also need to establish new global institutions to respond to the global dimension of the existing human society. The UN itself has to play a more central role in global economic management and should have access to large financial resources - the possible source of which we have already identified. The Bretton Woods Institutions -- the World Bank and the IMF - have moved away from their original mandate and have to be brought back to doing what were originally intended. They need to concentrate on human development as distinct from the means of development. They have to be more concerned with social and human factors than with statistics of growth. We need structural adjustment with a human face." End of Quote.

I wish you successful deliberations during this historic meeting.

Thank You.

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