

An Achievement We Can be Proud of

by Janet Jagan - January 13, 2008

In Australia, the death rate among Aboriginal children is nearly three times higher than the non-indigenous infants. Australian figures also show that 70% of the Aboriginal population, who number about 500,000, die before the age of 65 compared with 20% of other Australians. The average life expectancy for Aboriginal men is 59 compared with 77 for non-indigenous males. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare figures)

The report also says that poor nutrition, obesity, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse are the main causes of death. Overcrowded housing, unsafe drinking water and poor sanitary conditions are also contributing factors.

This is a brief picture of one country which has a serious problem with its indigenous population. Australia is considered one of the several countries of the world with a high standard of living, a growing economy and a highly rated democracy. Yet it has not brought those standards to its indigenous population so that they, too, could live a better life.

Take a look at our own area – the Western Hemisphere – which was at one time populated by the indigenous people, several of whom had developed high level societies, like the Mayas, the Aztecs and the Incas had maintained high levels of culture and science. For example, their irrigation systems still astound modern engineers.

Yet the remains of most of these indigenous peoples are treated poorly, many live at the lowest levels of poverty and little is done to bring their living, educational, health, etc. standards to the level of those who now occupy their lands.

The three giants of the hemisphere – the USA, Canada and Brazil – have failed miserably to bring their indigenous populations to the same levels as their own people.

In Guyana, those who cannot stand the fact that the People's Progressive Party is still in office, and has the unusual standing of having won, in all, seven elections (eight if we count 1964 when the PPP received the highest number of votes, but was denied government when the UK/USA alliance forced Burnham and D'Aguiar to form a coalition), find every single thing that the government does as wrong. Their vile propaganda fouls the air of the country. Yet, Guyana has much to be proud of.

It is my belief that Guyana, of all the countries with indigenous people, has performed the best for their interests and welfare. The PPP created a Ministry of Amerindian Affairs with a Cabinet Minister so that there would be a specific and constant focus on the problems of Guyanese Amerindians. So much has been achieved. One of the noteworthy developments is in the area of health, which has seen a marked reduction in infant and maternal mortality and actually, an increase in the Amerindian population. In most parts of the world, it is the opposite. Our health records are phenomenal. Over 90% of Guyana's children have been immunized, a positive ingredient for longer life.

Education is no longer limited to children of the coastal and riverain areas. It is now on an equal basis in the interior areas where the majority of Amerindian people reside. The introduction of Amerindian Month has helped focus and encourage attention their history and culture.

Throughout Guyana, access to secondary education has increased from 35% in 1992 to more than 80% last year. In the Amerindian areas, new secondary schools have been and are being built and staffed with teachers now being trained at centres within the regions. The new secondary school include three in Region 9, three in Region 1, one in Region 8, one in Upper Mazaruni plus two now in construction. New teachers training centres were opened, for example, in Regions One and Nine.

Several Amerindians are Chairmen of Regional Democratic Councils, and many take part in administration of their areas. The demarcation of lands and the issuance of land titles to Amerindian communities now covers more than 13.5% of Guyana's land area, as compared to 6.5% in 1992. The new Amerindian Act was passed on February 16, 2006, empowering Amerindians socially, economically and politically, bringing their status to the level of all Guyanese – quite a change from the demeaning third class citizenship of earlier days.

There are many things Guyanese can be proud of that have taken place since the 1992 PPP victory. And one of them is that our indigenous people are, at last, an integral part of the Guyanese community and a people on the 'go'!

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