



Address by Her Excellency, Mrs Janet Jagan,
President of Guyana
at the
Opening Session
of the
19th Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government
of the
Caribbean Community Tuesday, June 30, 1998,
Castries, St. Lucia.

Caricom Summits hold a special place in hearts of our people throughout the community since they allow the elected leaders of the people collectively to articulate the wishes and aspirations of our Caribbean family and at the same time to give account of progress made so far in deepening the community.

Our efforts at a Caricom Single Market and Economy is of primary importance if we are to make progress towards economic integration. An essential ingredient of this process is the free movement of skills and people. Some work has been done in this direction but more remains to be done. Of equal importance, is the strengthening of intra-regional trade and much more regional self-reliance is needed if we are to achieve goals set in the past.

A precondition for our Community's continued good health is the preservation of democracy, law and order, the adherence to the principles of human rights, political as well as economic, social and cultural. These principles are paramount in our region

which is made up of people of diverse ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds.

Mr. Chairman, it is in relation to these principles that I want to refer to the present situation in Guyana. Before I do so, however, allow me to thank sincerely the out-going Chairman of Caricom, the Prime Minister of Grenada, Dr. Keith Mitchell, for his outstanding working in steering the ship of Caricom since the last summit, and especially his leading role in the efforts aimed at surmounting the post-elections problems in Guyana.

People in the Caribbean have always been in solidarity with the people of Guyana, especially since 1992 when democratic renewal and economic revival put Guyana back on track after decades of decline that made our people and country among the poorest in the hemisphere.

After the PPP/Civic victory in 1992, because of the love of the people for their country and the goodwill shown to Guyana by the international community the stage was set for a comeback. Since then we have had the fastest growing economy in the

region and an open society where rights and freedoms have been enjoyed by our people which were previously denied.

The PPP/Civic administration, then headed by the late Dr. Cheddi Jagan, unfolded a vision for Guyana to bring economic prosperity, social progress and harmony in our society. He advocated a strong Caricom community and advanced ideas and plans for the region to secure a comfortable place in the world community.

But these achievements and the hope we instilled in the people for a bright future are being threatened. The optimism the Caribbean Community shared for Guyana to take a leading role in our development, given its vast resources. is being dampened. Why is it that the situation has changed so drastically? The present situation needs to be studied closely for it presents dangers which could have repercussions throughout the region.

In 1997 Guyana witnessed what local and foreign observers deemed as a free and fair elections. The official results showed the PPP/Civic winning 55.3 percent of the popular votes. The opposition PNC headed by Mr. Desmond Hoyte, however, declared the elections were massively rigged and mounted street demonstrations and a wave of violence that threatened the stability of the nation and created rifts in our multi-ethnic society.

Many attempts locally to get the opposition to seek peaceful resolutions to their ~~grouses~~^{protests} went unheeded. In those trying times, when perhaps the PNC had done enough to provoke ethnic strife, Caricom held out a hand of solidarity and we accepted without hesitation. Out of that engagement came what is now called the Herdmanston Accord in which all sides agreed to an unprecedented audit of the elections results, dialogue between the two major political forces, constitutional reform and new elections before the stipulated time. For our part, we acted with reasonableness and got most of the people to keep the calm in the interest of the nation.

Talks started and the audit took place. At the end of the audit no evidence of rigging was found and the results of the recount verified the official results declared by our Elections Commission. The opposition, instead of accepting the findings of the audit as they had committed themselves to do as part of the Herdmanston Accord, has challenged the findings of the audit report. In the capital city, Georgetown, the PNC has mobilised its supporters to continue the terror, bombings, bomb scares, robbing and beating of innocent citizens, mainly of indo-Guyanese origins. It is clear that the PNC has no intention of accepting the will of the majority. In so doing, it is challenging the democratic process. Thus democracy is on trial in Guyana.

Caricom and other governments in the hemisphere have so far shown understandable patience, hoping that those who were defeated at the polls would see the benefits of working together for the benefit of the nation. At all times, however, we have to ensure that there is peace and stability and all the stakeholders must sit around the table and find consensus on national issues.

In multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies such as ours, long standing problems, some of them rooted in our colonial past, must be addressed with patience and good sense. There must be willingness on both sides to make compromises in the interest of the nation

I urge my Caricom colleagues to take a strong position on the situation in Guyana. The violent street demonstrations ^{and the refusal of the PNC to accept the Audit} must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Caricom must stand up for democracy and the rule of law. ~~It must condemn in the strongest language the refusal of the~~ These are principles upon which the edifice of our community is built and any danger to these principles in one country will have its impact on the community as a whole. I warned at the Chilean Summit that if democracy fails in one of the countries in the hemisphere, it could produce a domino effect. That is why the threat to democracy in Guyana must be given the attention it deserves.

This summit will long be remembered because of the many special guests present. Outstanding among them, of course, is the President of South Africa, Mr. Nelson Mandela, the indomitable freedom fighter, a man who changed the course of history. We are happy to have too, that stalwart ^{of democracy and progress} for many years, the President of Venezuela, a good neighbour of Guyana.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate the new Chairman of Caricom, Prime Minister of St. Lucia, a country with which Guyanese have had strong ties for many decades. I am certain that his leadership in the coming period will take us to greater heights.

Thank You.