

GOVERNMENT OF GUYANA'S POSITION ON DEMOCRACY, JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

[Statement by Her Excellency Janet Jagan, O.E., President of the Republic of Guyana to the Second Summit of the Americas - Santiago, Chile April 18-19, 1998

The development and strengthening of democracy in Guyana and the Caricom region is a major imperative. The thrust of my administration has been to address this mandate by providing better governance and institutionalising the role of civic society.

Better governance calls for stricter accountability and probity of public officers. It also calls for unremitting public disclosures as to arouse and maintain the interest of broader society in the affairs of government. To this end in Guyana legislation has been enacted to enhance accountability of public officers and also to extend the mandate of the Office of the Auditor-General.

Since 1992 Guyana adopted a course to promote civilian involvement in government. The major focus here has been to organise at the community level for the development of community development groups and community policing groups. This approach has had immense successes and has become a bulwark for local government.

The strengthening of democracy will be a long and complex undertaking and this hemisphere must not tolerate any efforts to undermine the rule of law and the democratic order. We have experienced in Guyana the latest attempt to undermine democracy in our region. The region's response has been swift, but vigilance must be exercised to prevent this spectacle from continuing or reoccurring.

Our governments must commit themselves to addressing the socio-economic realities which conspire to create conditions of alienation and hopelessness which we all know as the breeding ground for antisocial activity. Thus addressing the socio-economic reality in the region is as important as mutual support in strengthening democracy.

I must highlight here the important role of the press. 1997 marked the second time in the history of our nation that press freedom was misused to support a palpable challenge to the State and the rule of law. We must attach great significance in this region to such a repetition as it bespeaks of greater efforts being needed to force the press to act at all times in ways to support our democracies.

Improvements in the administration of justice in Guyana and the region remain a challenge. More bilateral and multilateral support over the long term would be needed were the intentions of the regional governments to be achieved. In this sector the shortages of human, material and financial resources are considerable and repetitively hamstringing the best efforts of government, leading to the unacceptable delays in the provision of justice. The provision of justice actually includes the access to justice in a consistent and equitable way. Again, sizeable segments of our population fail to access justice and fail to have adequate representation in their search for justice. This again is a potent impetus to extreme social behaviour.

Finally as we continue to uphold the region's record on human rights we must pay attention to those instances where the rights of individuals and their God-given freedom conflict with the rights of the many and the rights of society. Deportees and extra regional reviews of capital punishment come easily to the mind.

Our region is a small one with high population densities and social divisions are extreme and poverty prevalent. Our prolonged and entrenched commitment to democracy is sorely threatened. We must act firmly and collectively to maintain our common democratic heritage.