

The UNESCO Gandhi Peace Prize:

A Proud Moment For Guyana

by H.Z. Ally

At a simple, but impressive ceremony in the Promenade Garden, Prime Minister Janet Jagan received the UNESCO Gandhi Gold Medal, thus becoming the first woman, and the first Caribbean citizen to receive this prestigious award since the medal came into being in 1994.

The award, UNESCO's highest accolade for peace and democracy was officially handed over to Mrs Jagan by President Sam Hinds on August 5, 1997, in close proximity to the statue of one of the greatest men that ever lived - Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, after whom the award was named.

The award is a fitting tribute to someone who has virtually dedicated her entire life to the cause of democracy, peace and freedom of the Guyanese nation and for that matter for humanity as a whole. It is, I believe, superfluous of me to highlight the numerous contributions Mrs Jagan has made over the decades in the quest for a better society. Suffice it to say that she is today the longest serving member of parliament in Guyana, and if I am not mistaken, in the entire English-speaking Caribbean.

The conferral of the award must be a proud moment not only for Mrs Jagan but for the entire Guyanese nation. Out of characteristic modesty the Prime Minister attributed the award to all those Guyanese who gave of themselves toward the cause of freedom and democracy, in particular her late husband Dr Cheddi Jagan, whose involvement in the struggle was inextricably linked to her own preeminence in the local and international arena.

The award comes at a very propitious moment in the life of the Guyanese people when there is a restoration of confidence and hope after over two

decades of despair and hopelessness. The PNC regime which had foisted itself on the nation, by illegal means, had during its period of nefarious misrule, instituted a reign of terror and institutionalised fear never seen before since the days of slavery and indentureship. The peace and tranquillity so dearly cherished by the Guyanese people were blatantly trampled upon by the PNC regime, all in an effort to consolidate and perpetuate minority and dictatorial rule.

Peace is not simply the absence of war. It refers to a state of being in which there is freedom from fear and the freedom to make choices, both from a political and an economic standpoint. There can be no real peace in an environment of degradation and want, where children are malnourished, many dying prematurely for want of food and medicine. Can one really speak of peace when children were deprived of an opportunity for learning as in fact transpired during the past PNC administration?

True enough, the situation in some parts of the world are immeasurably worse. One only has to reflect on the genocidal slaughter of innocent lives, in countries such as Rwanda, Zaire, Bosnia and so on to appreciate the true meaning of poverty and deprivation. Most of these calamities are the result of human greed and lust for power even at the cost of human lives.

It is to the credit of personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, our own Cheddi Jagan and Mrs Jagan that the world in which we live today is a much safer place. There is a noticeable relaxation of world tension, especially following the end of the Cold War. The arms race which consumed an inordinate quantum of global resources is now behind us.

Our late President and our Prime Minister have both played important roles in the promotion and preservation of world peace. Through the Guyana Peace Council, Guyanese were mobilised and sensitised as to the dangers of war. Our late President played a leading role in the World Peace Council of which he was a member of the Executive body.

There are however still hotbeds of tension for which a resolution must be found if only to prevent the continued wanton slaughter of innocent lives. The situation in Palestine still remains tense. Tribal conflicts in parts of the African continent must be brought under control. There is need for conflict management techniques by the United Nations which need to be much more proactive and preventive rather than being reactive and interventionist.

We in Guyana are blessed with a society that is in the main cohesive and peaceful. Let us continue to keep it this way. The PPP/Civic government is fully committed to the creation of a democratic, just and tolerant society in which there is political and economic space for all, regardless of political or ethnic considerations.

The conferral of the UNESCO peace prize on Prime Minister Janet Jagan is testimony to the fact that our efforts as a nation have not gone unrecognised. May I take this opportunity to congratulate Mrs Janet Jagan on this sterling achievement. I have no doubt that there is more to come as we strive as a people to create a just and better society.

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