

**INDEPENDENCE DAY 2008 MESSAGE:
OUR CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS
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On the occasion of our nation's twenty-ninth anniversary of independence, it is appropriate to reflect on our challenges and achievements over the past year and our current condition as we continue on our quest to enhance our possibilities and to reduce, as far as is humanly practicable, our limitations so as to make our lives better.

During 2008 the circumstances of the international political economy impacted adversely upon our nation as a whole and placed additional strain on the poor and working people. Oil prices rose sharply to the unprecedented figure of almost US \$150 per gallon on the international market. Food prices sky-rocketed as the imported commodities of flour, rice, meats and other basic items became hugely expensive, and scarce, internationally. Recently, the oil prices have subsided to just under US \$75 per gallon, heralding some relief. Politically, at the international level, strife, discord, and more, created immense uncertainty as to whether the centre can hold in a stable way. In the midst of all this, a massive meltdown in the banking and financial system in the citadels of capitalism, especially in the U.S.A. and Europe, has foretold an economic recession and, possibly, a depression, in several of the world's major economies.

Regionally, our neighborhood has become increasingly dangerous with increased violent crimes, drug-trafficking, and money-laundering.

Almost everywhere, the faces of men and women are strained and anxious. They are losing hope in a pessimist-filled world. Remarkably, here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, our people, despite the enormous challenges and difficulties which have come upon us from outside, have held our focus; we have accommodated the stresses and strains; we have even made progress, individually and collectively; and we have, as a people, cast aside the debilitating burden of helplessness. We are fighting the good fight. It is times like these that our mettle is tested. And we are more than holding our own.

To be sure, the creative policies and leadership of our government, and the fraternal assistance of friendly nations and our diaspora overseas, have been most helpful at this time. But fundamentally, it is the spirit, resolve, good nature, good sense, discipline, and hard work of the vast majority of our people, that have made us improve our lot and chalk up impressive achievements. The threat of adversity has steeled us; our will and spirit are undaunted; and our goodness and nobility have shone through. It all makes me so proud to be our country's Prime Minister. It has solidified even more my love for our people and our blessed country.

Nationally, the spate of vital state-sponsored developmental projects continue apace in their implementation. For example, the jet airport at Canouan has been opened and the construction of the Argyle International Airport has commenced. Six modern schools are under construction; the Modern Medical Complex at Georgetown is being built; the Modern National Library Complex is nearing completion; Police Stations, Learning Resource Centres, and several other state-buildings are sprouting up all over the country; the Windward Highway, from Fancy to Kingstown, is almost complete and plans are far advanced for the reconstruction of the main road from Kingstown to Buccament; and the Cross-Country Road is a continuing work in progress.

Meanwhile, the Education and Housing Revolutions are in full swing; the Wellness Revolution was launched; Poverty Reduction programmes have been stepped up; economic growth, though less than last year, is being recorded; fiscal consolidation continues; the modernisation and reform of our government is in progress; our image abroad is being enhanced daily; we are in the vanguard of regional integration efforts; our civilisation is being continually ennobled; and good governance reigns.

Our people are excelling in large areas of human endeavour. Our student's achievements are of the highest quality; our creative artists and cultural activists continue to produce remarkable works; our artisans, professionals, business people, farmers, fisher-folk and working people generally are most productive; and our leaders, by and large, are performing well.

It is unfortunate and sad that there are still those in our midst, albeit a tiny minority, who are bent on criminality and vagabondry. Unfortunate, too, that those who should know better are engaged in mischief, unreasonable political conduct, and even unpatriotic acts. The struggle of progressive, focussed people who are the bulk of our nation, continue against these. We will triumph, as always, despite the difficulties.

We are on the cusp of our thirtieth anniversary of independence which we celebrate next year. From now till then, we unveil our "Vincy Homecoming". Let us make this work as a united people.

I accordingly greet our nation with hope, optimism, and love, amidst all the challenges, this our twenty-ninth anniversary of independence. May Almighty God continue to bless us all.