

ON-GOING DEVELOPMENT AMIDST CONTINUING CHALLENGES

by

**Dr. The Hon. Ralph E. Gonsalves
Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines**



[Address on the Occasion of the 34th Anniversary of Independence of
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on October 27, 2013, at Victoria Park]

Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown
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[FORMAL GREETINGS]

Today, the independent, sovereign nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines celebrates its 34th anniversary.

The journey to independence, in 1979, and beyond, has tested us, individually and collectively. There have been triumphs and disasters, successes and failures, achievements and disappointments. Through it all we have emerged, as a magnificent part of an authentic, legitimate, and uplifting Caribbean civilisation.

As a nation we have been beaten on the anvil of experience, and forged in the cauldron of struggle. Colonial conquest and settlement, native genocide, the enslavement of African bodies, the indentureship of Portuguese and Indian migrants, the imperial oppression of our people, the colonial denial and denudation of our cultural essence, and the cynical manipulation of our people for the ends of Empire, have not succeeded in breaking our spirits or caused us to doubt our existential humanity. To be sure, we have, over time, encountered monumental setbacks; but in each case we have endured them, pulled ourselves together, and progressed, with God's help!

At Independence on October 27, 1979, we proclaimed unequivocally, and in wisdom, that our nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the

freedom and dignity of every man and woman. That proclamation continues to be our guiding light. We have built democratic institutions worthy of a free people. We have emphasised our commitments to family life, to individual rights and freedoms, to the rights of property and privacy, and to just economic rewards for our labours. At every turn, we have had to defend and protect our independence and sovereignty from neo-colonial threats and incursions. We shall never surrender our independence, sovereignty, nor liberty!

Our nation is small in size and population but we know from reason and experience that no one is better than us, and, as we rightly acknowledge, we are not better than anyone else. Our Creator has made each of us equal in His own image and likeness. No nation can lay claim to any exceptionalism or a right to rule

the world for, and by, themselves. Some nations are more powerful than others, but that power when exercised in relation to other nations must be circumscribed by, and contained within, the framework of civilised norms and international law, in much the same way that within nations the values of humanity and national law determine, and restrict, the actions of all, including the powerful. The vanity of power ought always to be humbled by the requisites of humanity and the law in, and between, nations.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a small, resource-challenged, vulnerable, middle-income developing country with a legacy of under-development due largely, though not exclusively, to native genocide, the enslavement of Africans, and colonial-imperial domination of over 200 years. I reiterate accordingly our just demand, collectively, for reparations for native

genocide and African slavery from the European countries which committed these horrendous crimes against humanity. Our entire Caribbean is duty-bound to work in unison to secure a repairing of the legacy of underdevelopment occasioned by native genocide and slavery.

Overlaying the structural bases of our condition are contemporary events and circumstances which exacerbate the fundamental limitations inherent in our political economy. Those contemporary encumbrances to development, which are huge, and externally-sourced, include: the global economic crisis of 2008, and continuing; the meltdown of the regional insurance giants — CLICO and BAICO — occasioning liabilities in St. Vincent and the Grenadines of a massive 16 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP); significant natural disasters

___ hurricane, rainstorms, landslides, and excessive wave action ___ spurred on by an exogenous climate change; and the almost complete removal of the preferential regime for our bananas in Europe consequent upon the trade liberalisation challenge before the World Trade Organisation (WTO) by the USA and Ecuador.

None of these additional major challenges, I repeat, is of our own making; but they have come upon us, and we have to address them and their immediate, adverse consequences for us.

Further, we have ourselves added to our collective burdens by senseless criminal violence through the action of a tiny recalcitrant minority, by unhealthy behavioural habits of too many of us resulting in diseases and ailments which may be avoidable, by our

failure or refusal to work as hard and smart as we should, and by unnecessary political divisiveness which undermines mature public policy discourses and social cohesion.

Our economy is slowly and haltingly emerging from three years of negative economic growth (2008 to 2010, inclusive). The economy was basically flat in 2011 with very marginal growth; and it grew by 1.5 percent in 2012; a similar level of growth is estimated for 2013 and 2014. The battering from the aforementioned constellation of forces has tested the resilience of our government and people.

Despite all these structural, historical, and contemporary challenges, and more, we have been able to build a free and democratic society; to enhance our many-sided development as a country with “*a high*

human development” index as assessed by the United Nations; to reduce sharply indigence and poverty; to advance as a fully-integrated society steeped in the tried-and-test values of our Caribbean civilisation, and a universal humanism; and to engage actively, and with some success, in a quest to construct a modern, many-sided, competitive economy which is at once national, regional, and global. But we are still not yet out of the proverbial woods. There is much more work to be done. Among other things our economy needs to grow at levels to absorb school-leavers; our public debt must be carefully managed; and our fiscal condition consolidated.

We have chalked up these accomplishments because of our people-centred vision of development; our practical elaboration and application of our philosophy of social democracy; our socio-cultural frame of the

further ennoblement of our Caribbean civilisation; our commitment to the deepening of regional integration; our strategic construction of a mixed economy involving a harmonious partnership of the private, cooperative, and state sectors; our socio-economic emphasis on education and health, poverty reduction and enlarged social safety nets, housing and infrastructural development, energy and other public utilities, the enhancement of airports and seaports and air and sea transport, telecommunications and information technology, citizen security and the delivery of justice, sports and culture, social inclusiveness and equality; the joinder of our nation-at-home and that in the diaspora; fiscal soundness with an admixture of prudence and enterprise; and the implementation of an effective and progressive foreign policy.

Our achievements, in practical terms, have been effected through the hard and smart work of the bulk of our people; the discipline, resilience, and overwhelming peacefulness of our people; the sensible public policies by our government; the solidarity of our many friends and allies overseas; the remittances from our nationals overseas; direct investment from sources foreign and domestic; and the enhanced regional integration of our economies.

Fellow-citizens, on-going progress has been made on existing projects and programmes and several new initiatives have been taken. I shall give some outstanding examples.

First, the Argyle International Airport, the largest capital project ever undertaken in our country, is scheduled for completion by Independence Day 2014,

God's willing! The Terminal Building is scheduled to be handed over to us by our friends from the Republic of China (Taiwan) sometime in December 2013. Immediately thereafter, the retrofitting of the Building itself will begin. The Earthworks are almost complete, and the process of paving the runway and apron has commenced, led by the Chatoyer-Che Contingent of Cubans and Vincentians which is today being renamed the Chatoyer-Che-Chavez Contingent in acknowledgment of the exceptional contribution of the late Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution to this enterprise. The other components of the airport project, including the Air Tower and Air Traffic Control Facility, the Cargo Terminal, and Car Park are in train.

All requisite lighting and other aerodrome facilities are being addressed. The US \$80 million, or so, which I had indicated in early 2013 would be required to

complete the airport project has been successfully mobilised mainly through our structured partnership with Venezuela and the ALBA Bank, the Caricom Development Fund, Taiwan, and the Bank of Nova Scotia, and through the sale of State-owned lands. The realisation of this extraordinary project of immense significance to our social economy is a splendid manifestation of regional and internationalist solidarity, our profound sense of self-mastery, committed quality work by personnel of all types, and outstanding managerial and political leadership.

We have embarked upon a potentially game-changing Geothermal Energy Project in conjunction with the Clinton Climate Initiative, Reykjavik Geothermal of Iceland, and Emera of Canada. Our country possesses immense geothermal resources underground, from which electricity can be generated for our

consumption, and for possible export through undersea technologies to neighbouring territories. I have been advised that, if all goes in accordance with plan, within four years, a 10-megawatt plant, to begin with, for electricity generation or some one-half of our current peak demand, is likely to be in place. It is anticipated that electricity so generated has the potential to slash electricity bills by one-half. Within ten years, St. Vincent and the Grenadines can be completely “green” in energy through a mix, principally, of geothermal, hydro, and solar energy. Geothermal energy has the potential to transform our economy, enhance competitiveness, and improve markedly household disposal incomes.

Two other exceptional capital projects on which preparatory work is currently being done are the Modern City at Arnos Vale, the site of the E.T. Joshua

Airport, which would be closed upon the completion and operation of the Argyle International Airport, and the removal, expansion, and modernisation of Port Kingstown to another appropriate location nearby. These are mega projects to be financed through public-private partnerships involving the State and investors at home and abroad. These, too, are transformational capital ventures designed to assist in putting St. Vincent and the Grenadines on a path of sustainable economic development. The vision is large, yet perfectly realisable! All this goes way beyond the tinkering or incremental changes to an inherited colonial economy.

Meanwhile, the Education Revolution continues to be deepened and broadened in each of its sub-sectors. Over the past year impressive accomplishments are evident in each of these areas especially in early

childhood and post-secondary education. In the latter regard, we completed the massive expansion of the integrated Community College at the Villa Campus with over 80,000 square feet of additional educational space at a cost of EC \$32 million, mainly a grant from the European Union.

Currently, we are also at work on two other huge programmes largely funded by the European Union: The EC \$34 million Banana Accompanying Measures (BAM) in Agriculture, and the EC \$35 million Health Modernisation Programme. These will be rolled out fully, early next year.

Two weeks ago, we launched, formally, the South Leeward Highway Project ___ some 11 kilometers of road reconstruction and realignment from Hospital Road to the Layou Post Office ___ financed jointly by a

soft-loan from the Caribbean Development Bank and the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines at a cost of EC \$46 million. Actual work on this project is scheduled to commence in January 2014.

Significant road and other infrastructural works are continuing or about to begin under the Post-Hurricane Tomas and Post-April 2011 Floods Projects financed by monies from several sources, but mainly through soft-loans from the Caribbean Development Bank (EC \$33 million) and the World Bank (EC \$13.5 million). A Regional Disaster Vulnerability and Recovery Project of EC \$54 million is also underway, financed mainly by a soft-loan from the World Bank.

Fellow-Vincentians, we are now finalising a fantastic project to deliver, hopefully, early next year at least 12,500 high quality Acer Computers with Microsoft

Software to students at the secondary schools and the Community College. The Venezuelan government is providing the bulk of the requisite monies (US \$5 million) and the balance from the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. We are being assisted in this venture, too, by the staff of a major computer magazine in Europe, the owner of which is a homeowner in Mustique, and a citizen of St. Vincent and the Grenadines by naturalisation. This computer project will complement the one which we initiated for primary schools in 2011, and which we must further refresh.

Meanwhile, the economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is benefiting from significant foreign and domestic investment, especially in the areas of tourism, agriculture, construction, energy, telecommunications, educational tourism, housing,

and assorted services. Huge tourism investments are underway or are about to commence in Bequia, Canouan, Mustique, Mayreau, and St. Vincent. In agriculture, farmers are returning to banana cultivation, and are investing in an increasingly diversified agriculture. Amajaro Trading is pursuing vigorously its substantial investment, in tandem with local farmers, the reintroduction of cocoa as a major cash crop. Cable and Wireless, Digicel, and Columbus are enhancing their telecommunications investments. In energy, VINLEC is investing heavily in solar energy and the upgrading of its three hydro-electric plants. The three medical schools in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Trinity, All Saints, and the American University) are growing with an aggregate of over 400 students; a fourth medical school, St. James School of Medicine has already secured accreditation, and is about to start-up in May next year. The state-owned

Housing and Land Development Corporation (HLDC) is shortly to begin its further expansion of the Green Hill and Clare Valley Housing Projects. The National Insurance Services (NIS) and the Government Employees Cooperative Credit Union (GECCU) are in partnership on a middle-income housing development at Peter's Hope on 57 acres of land; the infrastructural development on this project is slated for commencement later this year.

Fellow-Vincentians, we pursued a purposeful and dynamic regional and international agenda over the past year. Next year promises to be quite active, too, in these respects. On January 1st, 2014, I assume the Chairmanship of CARICOM for six months. The central on-going matters of climate change, renewable energy, external trade relations, deepening economic integration, freedom of movement of persons, job and

wealth creation, debt relief, enhanced functional cooperation, citizen security, and improved regional governance will be joined, at the top of the regional agenda, by other more recently-articulated issues of reparations, medical marijuana, and Haiti's especial concerns. All of these questions, and more, are considerations, too, for our international relations.

Our government continues to implement its policy of the distribution of housing lots and the provision of land titles to individuals who had long been in occupation of State lands. Within two or so weeks, we will be formally delivering letters regarding titles to land to over 250 persons at the Glebe in Barrouallie, many of whose families have been occupying these Church lands for as long as 100 years. My government is purchasing the lands from the Incorporated Trustees of the Anglican Church and is

selling them to the occupants at the concessionary price of ten cents per square foot. Housing lots in other areas of the country will be distributed, too, as soon as the land surveys are completed.

As our government has demonstrated repeatedly, we keep our promises solemnly made to the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines even though sometimes – infrequently - the circumstances may conspire to cause delays in the delivery of a specific promise. Accordingly, in their October pay cheque next week, all categories of public servants, including daily-paid employees, will receive back-dated to January 01, 2011, a 1 ½ percent salary increase, the balance of the heretofore agreed salary increase. Our government has had to find an additional sum in excess of \$9 million to effect this payment, a worthy accomplishment in these challenging times. This

retroactive salary increase is being made tax-free; by this gesture, the value of the package to the public servants is being enhanced by a further \$1 million. I feel sure that all public servants, teachers, nurses, and the other relevant categories of public employees will appreciate the especial effort of our government in delivering on its solemn promise. I have been advised that all the monthly-paid public servants will receive their back-pay on Wednesday next week; the daily-paid public employees will get their monies on Wednesday and Friday, next week.

This year again, for the 13th consecutive year, our government is providing the usual duty-free tax concession on Christmas Barrels from Monday, November 18, 2013, until December 31, 2013. This concession brings a Christmas cheer to thousands of Vincentians.

Sometime in the next few months I expect that the National Heroes Advisory Committee will present its report for Cabinet's consideration for a subsequent appointment by the Governor General of the nominated person or persons to the Order of National Hero. Eleven years ago, the Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, Chief of the Garifuna people, was appointed as our country's first, and thus far, only National Hero. There is now a consensus that other extraordinary and deserving of our deceased compatriots ought to be placed in that esteemed pantheon.

As we celebrate yet another Independence Anniversary, I urge all our citizens and other nationalities who reside among us to be exemplary in our work and production, and to be law-abiding.

Every progressive society globally has been built on the basis of productive endeavours and an uplifting bundle of cultural norms or values. We who are in that tradition and trajectory ought always to enhance our strengths and possibilities and reduce our weaknesses and limitations. We know that perfection is not attainable in this our Earthly City, but there are standards and benchmarks to which to aspire and achieve. No progressive society has ever been built on leisure, pleasure, and “nice time”, even though it is necessary and desirable for human beings to enjoy life in a sensible balance.

We have endured many challenges and obstacles in our history and our lives. We have survived and thrived. We are not daunted or overwhelmed by any of the current difficulties and those which may lay ahead. We are on the right developmental track, but,

as always we need to do better, and we can do better, together as one people under God in solidarity with our neighbours. Let us be more loving and caring to each other. Let us be more human and walk well with our God! Commit to Him and our plans will succeed!

There are those among us who love our country in the abstract, but dislike it or even hate in fact. Our compatriots all must avoid the attitude of negativism. We cannot love our country and refuse to lift it up. We cannot love it and, at the same time, run it down. We cannot claim to embrace St. Vincent and the Grenadines as land of our citizenship, and at the same time despise it. We must love St. Vincent and the Grenadines unconditionally, always!

Happy 34th Independence Anniversary, St. Vincent and the Grenadines!