

INDEPENDENCE DAY 2014: BELIEVE IN SVG

by

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



[Address on the Occasion of the 35th Anniversary of Independence of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on October 27, 2014, at Victoria Park]

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PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

[FORMAL GREETINGS]

INTRODUCTION

Thirty-five years ago today, St. Vincent and the Grenadines became an independent nation. On that day, October 27, 1979, in our new Constitution, we reaffirmed that our nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man. We solemnly expressed, then, in our foundation document, that we desired our society to be so ordered as to express recognition of democracy, free institutions, social justice and equality before the law. In our quest to realise the maintenance of human dignity, we pledged to safeguard the right of privacy, of family life, of property, and to foster the pursuit of just economic rewards for labour.

Today, thirty-five years later, on behalf of the sovereign people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines I reaffirm our commitment to these

freedoms, principles and ideals. Accordingly, we proclaim yet again our unwavering belief in God and our bedrock belief in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. A nation does not stand still. If we do not add constantly to our noble heritage, it would be depleted over time; if we do not grow as a people, we would falter; if the nation does not go forward, it would go backward. In order for us to progress as a people, we must believe steadfastly in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. I believe in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. I believe in our Caribbean civilisation of which our nation is an integral and vital part.

GLOBAL CONDITION

Fellow-Vincentians, the current global socio-economic and political condition which impacts our nation and region is fraught with complex difficulties and challenges. These include: the slow-down in the growth of the world economy; the unconscionable dismantling of trade preferences for bananas for small states like St. Vincent and the Grenadines; the harmful conflicts in Iraq, Syria, the Middle East generally; Ukraine; international terrorism; the spread of infectious diseases like Ebola; and the deleterious

consequences of climate change. We in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the region do not contribute to any of these impactful problems, but we are on the front-line in facing the pressures and hardships flowing there-from.

Regionally, the connected, though distinct, unravelling of CLICO and BAICO insurance giants, the stresses of some indigenous banks and other financial institutions, unsustainable public debt levels in most countries, devastating natural disasters, and an increasing incidence of serious crimes, home-grown and imported, have added to the troubling socio-economic woes.

Yet, we cannot allow the global, regional, and national difficulties and challenges to overwhelm us or to prompt us into a negative posture. We have many good things going for us, especially our people's resilience, their capacity for hard and smart work, their astuteness in finding spaces and opportunities for advancement in the global and regional apparatuses; the solidity of their tried and tested values; our instinct towards solidarity in the face of natural disasters or other travails; and the bundle of natural resources at our disposal for creative use.

Since the global economic melt-down in September 2008, and continuing, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and our Caribbean region have had a rough economic side. Still, the statistics show that we in this country have been weathering the socio-economic storms much better than most of the neighbouring countries. At the same time, there is an urgency in creating greater national wealth, more jobs, and reducing further the vulnerabilities, poverty and indigence, which still afflict too many of our people. My government is focussed always on these multiple tasks; and we have been making progress. But there is much more which is required to be done.

2010 to 2014

In the last five years, 2010 to 2014, inclusive, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been struck hard by five (5) major adverse climate events: Hurricane Tomas in October 2010, the April Floods of 2011, the Christmas Eve disaster of 2013, and two prolonged droughts in the first five months of 2010 and 2014. In the aggregate these natural disasters caused loss and damage amounting to EC \$600

million or roughly one-third of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Christmas-eve disaster alone amounted to \$330 million or 17 percent of GDP. In that disaster, twelve of our citizens lost their lives. We remember them today with solemnity, in solidarity and fellowship, and in our prayers.

Over the last ten months since the Christmas-eve disaster, our people and their government have responded admirably to rebuild the lives and material conditions of families, communities, and the nation. In this process we have been accorded prompt, and ongoing assistance, from friendly governments and institutions regionally, in our hemisphere, and internationally. We thank them from the bottom of our hearts. In our profound gratitude we assert that we are not, as yet, out of the proverbial woods. There is much work to be done in the enterprise of relief, rehabilitation, and sustained recovery. To this end, our government has already mobilised significant resources and is on track to secure more finances for the recovery process over the next two to three years.

PROGRESS AMIDST CHALLENGES

Fellow-Vincentians, your government has ensured that we have not only held things together, but advance, in progress, on several fronts. To begin with, employees in the public sector, including in the central government, have not been laid off as a consequence of any economic or fiscal challenge. Indeed, more persons are currently employed in the state sector than at the start of the global economic downturn in 2008. This is especially so for vital public sector employees such as teachers, nurses, doctors, police officers, and public servants generally, including non-established workers. Moreover, a special employment programme (the SET) exists for graduates of universities and our Community College.

There have been, too, no spending cuts in critical areas such as health, education, housing, national security, and agriculture. We have been both enterprising and prudent as all the circumstances demand. The delivery of laptops (almost 30,000) to our students, first in primary and then in secondary schools, has been an example of a dramatic commitment to our young people and their education. Other targeted strategic initiatives abound in other

areas such as: the unprecedented \$20 million housing reconstruction programme after the Christmas-eve disaster, and continuing; the exceptional \$6 million soft-loan programme to farmers through the State-owned Farmers Support Company; the modernisation of the health sector and enhanced delivery of health services as necessary accompaniments to the Education Revolution; and the targeted public investments in the Police, Coast Guard and Fire Services, regional air transport, and natural disaster management.

Concurrently with all this, and more, has been the ongoing construction, without let up, of the Argyle International Airport, a long-held dream of generations of Vincentians which is about to be realised with the airport's completion and opening next year.

CHIK-V AND EBOLA

Despite the remarkable advances in our health and wellness sector, including in public health and our health partnerships with other governments and institutions globally, including non-governmental organisations, health threats still loom large. First, there is the

pesky Chikungunya, and now, Ebola. We have taken credible steps in both battles in conjunction with regional and international partners. But much more needs to be done. My government will shortly be announcing even more targeted measures in this regard. Everyone has to be engaged in the campaign against Chik-V and Ebola. We are confident that the Chik-V can be defeated, and the threat of Ebola be overcome with coordinated work through the OECS, CARPHA, PAHO, WHO and ALBA. A Working Group on Ebola has been established in St. Vincent and the Grenadines to drive this vital activity.

LIFE AND LIVING

Fellow citizens and residents, independence, like life and living, is not only about material, bread-and-butter concerns, fundamental as they are. We know the scriptural truth that “man and woman cannot live by bread alone”. The spirit of love for one another and our nation under God’s suzerainty is essential for our life and living. There is, in our nation, too much unnecessary, unproductive, and even dangerous, bickering among neighbours, co-workers, church people, within and between congregations, and

members or supporters of competing political parties. Foolish vanities, pride, vengeful spirits, and a lack of a necessary self-restraint cause too much confusion, bad-blood, and even criminal misconduct. Each of us has to re-examine himself and herself and do better. The personal bile and hatred spewed daily by some persons in ordinary conversations, on talk-radio, and on the internet, including social media, ought to stop. The malicious untruths, reckless innuendos, and blatant distortions must give way to the quest for truth, fair comment, and measured language. Robust debate with characteristic Caribbean humour and picong can be conducted in a competitive democracy without a descent into unbecoming language. At the same time we must learn to say “sorry” for errors committed; and also say “thanks”, gratitude and appreciation for deserving conduct or our abundant blessings. I urge this on all of us at a personal level, as a collective or as a nation.

Our nation’s Constitution prohibits discrimination of any person by State authorities and holders of public offices on the grounds of sex, race, place of origin, political opinion, color or creed. Yet this kind of discrimination, in favour of or against someone, has been

practiced in the not-too-distant past, and even currently in some cases. To the extent that any of this exists today, it must be stopped; it is wrong. For example, some institutions of State and public officials in the past, and even today, have discriminated against Rastafarians, individually and as a group. Similarly, there has been discrimination at one time or another against religious minorities, for example, Spiritual Baptists and, more recently, other minority religious groups. In respect of all these acts of constitutionally prohibited discrimination I say “sorry” on behalf of the Government and People of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. We must do better; we can do much better in these respects.

Fellow-Vincentians, we are blessed with a sound, independent and impartial judicial system which delivers justice on a daily basis. From time to time, the judicial system may be perceived as delivering, contrary to its high ideals, two sets of justice, one for the well-placed and another for the disadvantaged. In those circumstances it is right and proper for the sobering voice of public opinion to be heard. Justice is not a cloistered virtue; its strength and societal value is fortified by informed, respectful, and even robust criticism which nevertheless avoids scandalising or pulling

down the Court and allied judicial institutions. These balancing mature, and proportionate considerations are necessary and desirable for the maintenance of a just, free and democratic society.

REFLECTIONS

Every Independence Day we begin our reflections, historically, from at least 1763 when Britain assumed colonial over-lordship of St. Vincent and the Grenadines consequent upon the Treaty of Paris and the general carve-up of the Eastern Caribbean between the British and the French. Through our history of 216 years of almost unbroken British colonial domination between 1763 and 1979, our people have endured hardship and oppression, native genocide and slavery, indentureship and socio-economic marginalisation, race and class discrimination. Through it all, we have struggled for freedom, justice, and democracy to emerge as a modern, sophisticated, independent nation-state taking its rightful place in the comity of nations, internationally. Still, there are many historical wrongs to be righted. We are, accordingly in the forefront of the just regional campaign for reparations against the former

colonial powers on account of the awful legacy of underdevelopment of native genocide and slavery perpetuated against our forbears.

BE GRATEFUL

At this time we remember our failures and setbacks, our triumphs and advances, our limitations and possibilities in our march for a better life in justice, freedom, democracy, and independence. We remember and praise the valiant efforts of our forbears and their leaders. We remember with profound gratitude the heroic leadership of our National Hero, the Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, Chief of the Garifuna People, and the towering contributions of other exceptional leaders including especially, George Augustus Mc Intosh, Ebenezer Theodore Joshua, Robert Milton Cato, and J.P. Eustace, all of blessed memory. Sir James Mitchell, who thankfully is still with us, is increasingly being recognised, as the historical dust settles, for his sound leadership.

As usual, on Independence Day, I have a few announcements to make.

First, the duty-free concessions on Christmas Barrels will take effect this year from November 17th and will run to December 31st.

Very shortly, my government will initiate a huge, special Christmas works programme of at least \$3 million plus a special clean-up provision of \$500,000 for capital city, Kingstown. Thousands of Vincentians will receive short-term employment under this programme as we, at the same time, improve our physical surroundings.

The on-going housing rehabilitation programme continues. I am now finalising an order for a further \$6 million for building materials, including a provision for materials with which to commence in 2015 the “Lives to Live” Housing Programme, of timber construction, to cater for persons with physical and other disabilities.

I assure the hard-working and deserving farmers that the current \$6 million soft-loan programme through the Farmers Support Company will be buttressed by a further \$6 million for the year 2015, which I plan to front-load.

The young graduates of the Community College and University will note that the advertisements are already published for the new applicants for the year 2015 to continue the path-breaking Support for Education and Training (SET) Programme. Please pay attention to this, my dear young graduates.

Last week, my government awarded a bonanza of scholarships, exhibitions and bursaries to deserving students who were successful in the recent CAPE Exams. There are eleven national scholarships, three exhibitions, and six bursaries, twenty awards in all valued at \$5 million dollars. These are in addition to the plenitude of tertiary educational opportunities through other scholarships, tuition bursaries, and student loans for economically-disadvantaged students. Our nation is on target to secure at least one university graduate per household by 2025.

In my forthcoming Budget for 2015, I will detail a 5-year \$50 million rehabilitation and reconstruction programme of government buildings in Kingstown, starting next year. This is part of a more comprehensive urban development plan for our capital city.

I am aware that many of the secondary, village and feeder roads are in a state of disrepair. The recovery effort after the Christmas-eve disaster of 2013 interrupted somewhat our comprehensive road repair programme. That programme of road repair has resumed, and will be intensified in early 2015.

The low salaries for part-time government employees such as cleaners and workers in the school-feeding programme must be put right. From January 2015 there will be salary increases for these employees, and others. In the same vein, our government will shortly set in train the review, upwards, of the statutory minimum wages for various categories of workers. Shortly, too, our government will be engaging the public sector trade unions on the issue of improved terms and conditions of work of public servants of all categories.

I urge you to listen to my Budget Address 2015 for other major initiatives when I debate the Appropriate Bill in January 2015.

I hereby announce, too, fifteen (15) additional persons to be accorded the status of Cultural and Sporting Ambassadors. Last week, Cabinet appointed as Cultural Ambassadors the following: Cecil “Blazer” Williams, Ken Isles, Marlon “Matafix” Roudette, Elroy “Blondie Bird” Boyd, Julian “Pilling” Pollard, Errol “Sardo” Sutherland, Rondy “Luta” Mc Intosh, Orande “Bomani” Charles, Shaunelle Mc Kenzie, and Shernelle “Skarpyon” Williams. The newly-appointed Sporting Ambassadors are: Dr. Halimah De Shong, Deighton Butler, Stanley “Luxie” Morris, Denis Byam, and Sabrina Mitchell.

These appointments reaffirm our government’s conviction that culture, the arts, and sports, as well as other uplifting aspects of life and living, are vital to our nation’s well-being and the further ennoblement of our civilisation.

HAPPY INDEPENDENCE

Thirty-five years point to a growing maturity. As we celebrate our Independence Day 2014, let us truly believe in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and its future. Let us love one another. And let us

redouble our efforts on behalf of the unemployed, the poor, the disadvantaged, the afflicted, and to lift further our nation, and all its citizens.

Happy Independence 2014!