

# **Continued Progress in the Midst of Tough Challenges**

**Message for Independence 2016 By Dr. The Hon. Ralph E. Gonsalves,  
Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines as St. Vincent and the  
Grenadines celebrates its thirty-seventh year of independence  
on 27 October 2016**

Over these past 37 years, our nation has made significant socio-economic and technological progress, despite its small geographic and population size, its relative scarcity of material resources, its extremely challenging external economic and political environment, and its vulnerability to natural disasters. Much development has been accomplished, but much still remains to be done.

Our nation's progress, enhanced prosperity, peace and socio-political stability have been achieved largely through our own efforts at home, in concert with the considerate assistance of our diaspora, friendly nations abroad, and supportive institutions and peoples regionally and globally, under the suzerainty of a blessed God. Despite our individual and collective sinfulness and short-comings, Almighty God has been good and loving to us. He has helped us to overcome our limitations and realise a host of our possibilities. Morning by morning new mercies we have seen and received; and all that we need, His hand has provided. Great is His faithfulness!

Today, therefore, we are first of all grateful to a forgiving and loving God. Secondly, on behalf of the entire nation, I thank most sincerely everyone, of all walks of life, at home and abroad, Vincentians and non-Vincentians alike, for the contributions, however small, that have been made, and are being made, to our people's upliftment. Our gratitude is immense and it is heart-felt.

The Independence which we celebrate on October 27, 2016, is essentially an independence which we caused to be restored to us 37 years ago through our nationalist struggles and negotiations with the departing colonial power, Britain. Over 200 years earlier, in 1763, consequent upon a carve-up of several Caribbean territories by Britain and France at their Treaty of Paris, the independence of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, \_\_\_ then known as Yuremein or

Youlou and the Begos \_\_\_ was taken away from our nation by the British colonisers, settlers, and conquerors. So, on October 27, 1979, our political independence was repossessed by us. It is that repossession of our independence that we now commemorate and celebrate.

Our population in 1773 was comprised mainly of the indigenous Callinago and Garifuna people. By 1979, the population's composition was largely of African descent, in a multi-racial mix that included descendants of Indian, Portuguese, and Anglo Saxons, and recent arrivants from the Middle East and elsewhere. That is still the integrated population mix today of a creolised Caribbean people. History, migration, enslaved and free, and biology, have conspired to make us the globalised people we are.

In commemorating and celebrating our independence, we must avoid any debilitating chauvinism or narrow insular nationalism. Contemporary St. Vincent and the Grenadines cannot isolate or cut itself off from our region or the world; indeed, it is absolutely impossible to be in any such pristine isolation. While being true to our patrimony and committed to our St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we must recognise that we are part of an authentic Caribbean civilisation and an integral member of our family of nations globally. Indeed, our nation's very small size imposes upon us an especial obligation to interface meaningfully with our region and the world, in the interest of our people's development and upliftment.

This interface, among other things, touches and concerns social interactions, people-to-people contacts, political engagements, trade and economic relations, including the attraction of foreign direct investment, migration, and technological advancements. In the process of this many-sided interface, our approaches will necessarily contain elements of resistance, embrace, and accommodation to this or that consideration or matter arising from the constellation of external forces so as to secure our national interest.

I restate these verities at this time because there is present in some discordant circles an infantile or ill-conceived aversion to things non-Vincentian, and a wholly unrealistic devotion to an hermetic self-sufficiency. I reaffirm the necessity and desirability for St. Vincent and the Grenadines to build a modern, competitive, post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional and global. And we must train our people to think in these terms, to acquire the requisite skills for this modern political economy, and to interface confidently, in practice, with the region

and the world. There is no other credible path to continued progress, prosperity, peace and socio-political stability.

Less than one year ago, in December 2015, the Unity Labour Party (ULP) was returned to government, in free and fair elections, for its fourth consecutive five-year term - an unprecedented achievement in terms of majorities in both parliamentary seats secured and popular vote attained. Since December 2015, the ULP government has been very focussed in carrying out its Manifesto pledges, particularly in respect of job and wealth creation; the reduction of poverty and inequality; the consolidation and expansion of the education and health revolutions; the near-completion of the construction of the Argyle International Airport; the ongoing preparatory work for port development and the city at Arnos Vale; the Geothermal Project; the tourism projects in Bequia, Canouan, Mayreau, Union Island, and on mainland St. Vincent, including Mt. Wynne-Peter's Hope; the rebuilding of bridges and roads; the construction of sea and river defences; the expansion of telecoms; fiscal, financial and monetary stability, and low inflation; the pursuit of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including the battle against harmful climate change; and the deepening of political democracy.

One very worrying feature in our society is the unacceptably high incidence of violent crimes, particularly involving unlicensed firearms, committed by young men. While our people are overwhelmingly law-abiding and non-violent, a very small group of violent criminals are causing our nation and the affected families too much pain, loss, suffering, and insecurity. My government is committed to reducing markedly, and eradicating, these gun-related, and other, crimes of violence. This task, however, is not only for the government and the Police Force.

This matter concerns all of us. Thus, our homes, schools, churches, communities, and the media must be engaged in a focussed way in addressing this violent condition among this small group of criminal offenders and the circumstances which give rise to such violence.

Still, for all this, our country remains safe, and citizen security, through challenged, is sound. But we must nevertheless do much better in these and other respects.

To those of our citizens who are poor or indigent and those who are unemployed, I want you to know that you are especially on my mind daily. I hear the voices of pain and anguish of all those

who are economically disadvantaged. Believe me when I say to you that every day I seek to implement policies and programmes to assist in the uplifting your lives and living conditions. I know that we have made progress in reducing poverty and indigence, but there is so much more to be done in these respects and for livelihoods to be sustained. Thus, the unveiling of the Zero Hunger Project and the ramping up of allied programmes for sustainable livelihoods. My government will continue to work for you especially.

At Independence 2016, I repeat the charge given to us in the Book of Micah: Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Happy Independence 2016!