

ERC Chairman shares his vision for Guyana...Cont'd from page 7

antagonism instead of tolerance and understanding.

Let us be objective and fair

“Let us take time to listen before we oppose or reject,” as the Guyanese proverb says- Let us take sense out of nonsense.

We can disagree without destroying a vision. We can differ without shutting the door to dialogue which is essential in the process of participatory democracy and more importantly, in the building of social cohesion. Instead of using language as a weapon to destroy let us use it as a tool to

build bridges of national reconciliation and healing.

Let us as residents of a community, as citizens of this nation stop blaming politicians and others for where we are today and ask ourselves, what can I do for the development of my community and country, and go ahead and work towards that goal. Let us use our language to propagate possibilities and let us put our hands to the plough to cultivate fruits of prosperity, compassion, staying power and patriotism.

ERC concludes Guyana Rastafarian Council's 'haircutting' complaint

The Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) has concluded its investigation into the Guyana Rastafarian Council's (GRC) complaint of the cutting of the hair of Rastafarian prisoners.

There were several issues for consideration, one of which was whether the cutting of the hair of a Rastafarian can be legitimately carried out by the Guyana Prison Service (GPS), and whether such an act is a case of discrimination.

Investigations into the legality of the GPS action revealed that section 73 (2) of the Prison Rules, Cap. 11:01 provides for the cutting of male prisoners' hair. The rule states that “the hair of a male prisoner may be cut as short as is necessary for good appearance and the maintenance of health and cleanliness.

Special rules have also been made with respect to Untried Prisoners in Section 316 (1) of the Prison Rules and it states that “an untried prisoner shall not be required to have his hair cut, if he usually wears a beard, unless a medical officer deems it necessary for the purposes of health or cleanliness, and his hair shall be cut no closer than is necessary for those purposes.

In an invited comment, Director of Prisons Mr. Dale Erskine said that there are other conditions apart from those stipulated in the rules under which a

prisoner's hair can be cut. If it is brought to the attention of authorities that weapons and other prohibited articles inimical to the security of the prisons are hidden in prisoners' hair, it will be cut, the Director added.

With reference to the protection of human rights enshrined in the Constitution of Guyana, Article 145 provides for the freedom of conscience which includes the freedom of thought and religion. However, the Constitution also states that it will not be in contravention of the Constitution if anything is done under any other law so far as the law in question is in the interest of 'defence, public safety, public order, public morality and public health'.

According to legal interpretation of this law, which the ERC sought, this article stipulates that in certain exceptional cases, as mentioned above, the right guaranteed under this article may be contravened under the authority of another law. The legal interpretation concluded that it is arguable that the cutting of a prisoner's hair, in the context of GPS's policy, may not be considered a breach of the fundamental rights of the prisoner.

The GRC had written the ERC August last, regarding the cutting of the hair of Rastafarians in prison, and made a request for the Commission to take a position on the matter.

November – December 2006 - Vol. 5



News Letter

ERC- Promoting Harmony and Good Relations

ERC hosts historic National Conversation concluding MSF

- Government and Opposition find common ground on issues of national development

Government, Parliamentary Political Parties, Trade Union, the Private Sector, Labour Union and civil society gathered together in a historic National Conversation of the ERC/UNDP Multi Stakeholder Forum (MSF), November 15 and 16 last, at the Guyana International Conference Centre.

Held under the theme “enhancing social cohesion and deepening participatory democracy through dialogue,” the National

Conversation created a safe space for Guyanese from all sectors to candidly discuss issues which affect their livelihood at the national, regional, neighbourhood and individual levels.

In his opening address, Chairman of the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC), Bishop Juan A. Edghill informed the delegates of the genesis of the MSF. He stated that it dates back to April 2005 when the ERC hosted a Conflict...

(Cont'd on page 2)



A section of the audience at the National Conversation November 15-16, 2006

ERC Chairman shares his vision for Guyana (See Editorial... Page 8)

ERC concludes GRC's hair cutting complaint (Page 8)

ERC meets Ondereeming residents on equitable electricity service (page 6)

Ethnic Relations Commission
66 Peter Rose & Anira Streets, Queenstown

ERC hosts historic National Conversation concluding MSF...cont'd from page 1

Transformation Workshop with parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties facilitated by South African Conflict Transformation Consultant Mr. Roelf Meyer.

The Chairman said that participants were so encouraged by what transpired at that workshop that they asked for the process to be continued at the community level and the ERC was mandated to do this. With the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the MSF commenced in March of 2006.

Among its eight objectives, the MSF was expected to increase public focus on development issues rather than those which divide and to generate optimism and commitment towards a positive future, through dialogue.

The Chairman noted that the issues affecting national development had already surfaced during the MSF and thus they were not to be rehashed at the National Conversation.

“We are here to develop course of actions to address the specific issues-criminal activities, alleged discrimination in the awarding of contracts, inadequacies in our education system, etc.

We are here to commit our policy makers at all levels, to time-frames when affirmative action can be taken,” the Chairman said.

The discussion was based on eight (8) themes, namely: access to opportunities and equitable distribution of resources; infrastructure market and economy; governance and democracy; crime, law and order; morals values, social inclusion, social issues; health youth and education; environment and land issues, and the Amerindian Bill.

These themes had been amalgamated from discussions in the Neighbourhood and Regional Conferences of the MSF, conducted in all ten (10) regions.

Through a process of random selection, delegates attending the National Conversation were placed in small groups and were guided by trained facilitators to talk about the initiatives and recommendations currently in place to address the issues detailed in the themes.

Delegates were also expected to suggest the course of actions which would ensure the implementation of their recommendations. Most importantly delegates had to determine which policy maker(s), government ministry or regional executive, should be committed to affirmative action to ensure that these recommendations are implemented.

Groups Discussions

Access to opportunities and equitable distribution of resources - It was posited that minority groups, specifically the Indigenous People, youth and women encounter difficulties when seeking to access loans for capital investment from financial institutions such as IPED. Delegates stated that the number of requirements needed to access the loans deterred potential investors. And, in cases where persons accessed IPED loans, repayment was difficult because of the slow economic progress in the area.

To address this perceived inequity in capital financing, it was recommended that government should set out the micro credit framework for lending institutions to ensure equitable access to loans among Guyanese.

Youth representatives in the groups were peeved about the current policy in place by the Ministry of Housing for an individual to apply for and acquire a house lot. They felt that this policy alienates them from economic development. The Ministry of Housing should re-examine the policy that a person should have three (3) children to be eligible for a house lot, it was recommended.

(Cont'd on Page 3)



Editorial

Chairman, Ethnic Relations
Commission- Bishop Juan A. Edghill
***My Vision for Guyana- A Guyanese
Vision***

The Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF) took us all across the country to communities I have never heard of before. In many instances, residents were asked to share their vision or dream for Guyana and at all the meetings, the dreams expressed were positive and of hope.

If I am to share with you my dream of the Guyana I envisage, I would tell you of a Guyana of equal opportunity for all.

A Guyana where all Guyanese can have equal access to social services.

A Guyana where the young people are able to fulfill their desires for educational and economic development in the country of their birth, and not the so called ‘greener pastures’.

A Guyana where jobs are given to the most suitable applicant and not to the person related to or connected to the person in authority, where contracts are awarded not to the contractor who is a relative of the regional official but to the contractor who can do the job regardless of who is his family or relative or to which political party he is affiliated.

I envisage a Guyana where all people of all races, colours, people of all religions or beliefs can exist side by side and share in the economic pie, where even if you do not like the other person, you respect his right to be here and to practice his profession or religion.

I would like to see a Guyana where resources are distributed according to needs, not relative to demographic and ethnic prejudices

I envision a Guyana where communities share in the decision making process and all feel they have a contribution to make

towards the development of their country and their efforts are appreciated.

We are going in the direction we are headed

We must, before any meaningful changes are realised, develop a common **Guyanese Vision**. We cannot afford **Di-Vision**. We cannot have a Government Vision and an Opposition Vision, an Indian and an African Vision. For Guyana to realise the level of development to become the envy of other Caricom States, a **Common Vision** is necessary.

How much more time must we spend as a people blaming the other side for our failure to move forward?

How much more effort and energy will we spend in festering past animosities which have prevented us from moving forward? For too long have we held on to the past and allowed old hurts to affect our ability to move forward.

We are becoming what we are beholding

Let us visualize and dream together, Let us paint the picture and realise it together. The picture of: economic strength, political stability, equal opportunities and equal access to resources, youth empowerment, social and moral transformations, the Rule of Law and good governance.

In the fabric that constitutes Guyana we must recognize ourselves as having a role to play in Guyana’s development. We must recognize our importance as a partner in this development no less or no more than any other partner. While the government as the elected representative of the people may be the more visible partner in this process, each of us has a contribution to make.

Our attitude will determine our Altitude

Let us move from talk to action. “When all is said and done, more is always said than done”

Personal responsibility must be the energy that fuels implementation and action.

Enlightenment must be cause for affirmative action. Let us do it for ourselves, let us do it for Guyana.

The Language of Development

The racial divide that has stagnated our national development has survived for decades among the ethnic groups and politicians because we have fed it with words which create ... (cont'd on page 8)

ERC hosts historic National Conversation concluding MSF... cont'd from page 3

The areas of disagreement were not many in comparison to those areas of consensus. The government and opposition stakeholders did not agree on the issue of shared governance. They shared agreement on the concept of *inclusivity*, but the form it should take was the main area of disagreement. There was a recommendation for a national referendum on this matter; government and opposition being the main stakeholders.

The issue of national service was another area of disagreement; whether it should be re-introduced and applied voluntarily or whether the benefits should be extracted in a de-institutionalized manner.

The stakeholders also differed on the procurement of contracts and effective functioning of the Regional Tender Boards. Some opined that the process is transparent, that contracts are awarded to the lower bidder, while other stakeholders believed that the process is plagued with discrimination and marginalisation.

The Chairman, ERC in his closing address at the two-day event noted that despite differences in ideology, thinking and grouping, Guyanese still find common ground, wherever it exists.

He made reference to the AFC's presentation which noted that our shared vision identifies peace, harmony, creating a society based on equal treatment and equal opportunity and this was echoed in the TUF's presentation.

All of the political parties, he said, generally stated what is required for this nation's progress and in doing so, restated some of the basic tenets of the Constitution of Guyana.

The ERC Chairman continued that a high level of participation and interaction was accomplished in an environment in which social, economical, cultural and political differences existed. "All of us in this room have different opinion, views, ideology, religious and belief systems

but because we wanted to, we sat together in a matured environment and discussed these issues. If nothing else comes out of this conversation, this can be a template of how we discuss issues at the community level, regional level and national level.

The past two days have been a very rewarding experience. I am inspired to have been a part of the high level of good will and openness. This process can only move Guyana forward", the Chairman concluded. The National Conversation was an ERC project supported by the USAID and UNDP.

ERC meets Onderneeming residents on equitable electricity service

The Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) met with residents of Onderneeming, West Bank Demerara, December last, to investigate a complaint of alleged discrimination in the distribution of power by the Guyana Power and Light Inc (GPL). Chairman and Investigators of the Commission toured the Onderneeming community to assess the situation. They discovered that there were two construction companies operating in the area, with different arrangements with their respective clients.

Home owners who contracted one of the companies had an arrangement for the provision of electricity in the construction package. They had to advance more money for the power supply while home owners who utilised the service of the other construction company advanced less money and electricity was not included in the package.

However, the walk-about in the village saw that GPL was in the process of erecting poles to facilitate the electrification process of the entire community.

Residents were satisfied that the process had started but bemoaned the length of time it was taking.

At the end of the exercise, residents were assured that there was no case of discrimination by the power company.

ERC hosts historic National Conversation concluding MSF... cont'd from page 2

The new method of school placement introduced by the Ministry of Education was another concern delegates raised under the theme *access to opportunities and equitable distribution of resources*. It was stated that the new policy which stipulates that children would be placed in the 'catchment' area they reside marginalizes some from the best schools, especially those who reside in 'depressed communities' and rural areas.

Infrastructure/ market and economy- There were suggestions that NDCs should be given adequate subventions to desilt clogged drainage canals. There were also calls for immediate rehabilitation to eroded sea defences.

The matter of concession for the import of agricultural equipment was raised under this theme. Delegates recommended that the provision of subsidy for agricultural equipment and inputs, without stringent bureaucracies/discrimination, is important to propel the agricultural sector.

With reference to housing infrastructure, delegates highlighted the occurrence of residents, who possess properties in developing housing schemes, having to pay for electricity and potable water infrastructure. Payment for house lots and development of infrastructure such as electricity, water and road is made to the Ministry of Housing and thus no other payment should be made to these utilities companies, the delegates stated. Concerning the construction of road, there were suggestions that the Ministry of Public Works should monitor road construction projects to ensure the building of strong and durable roads. This would avoid 'patch work', delegates said.

Governance democracy and public administration- It was recommended that the level of discretion placed in the hands of public administrators should be reduced. Delegates felt that this would eliminate alleged practices of discrimination and corruption.

Crime law and order- the delegates opined that there seems to be an inequity in the granting of pre-trial liberty to persons accused of crimes. Reference was made to the granting of bail to persons who are charged with illegal possession of large quantities of arms and ammunition, while remanding persons who are charged for lesser offences. This phenomenon was cited as an example of class discrimination in the judicial system, delegates concluded.

On day- two of the National Conversation all parliamentary Political Parties, the Private Sector and Labour Unions presented their vision for Guyana. This was the basis for discussion in the small groups later in the day. Delegates were given the opportunity to discuss the various presentations; specifically, areas of consensus and areas of disagreement.

Delegates found that most presenters agreed on several issues including:

1. A racial divide exists among our ethnic groups and thus there is need for Guyanese to live and work together and celebrate our multi-ethnic diversity
2. The need for an improved standard of living and the building of a better Guyana
3. Equal opportunities, access to resources and treatment for all citizens
4. Meaningful dialogue (this was phased differently by most presenters: meaningful conversation, a non-violent path to change, etc)
5. Respect for the rule of law and elimination of corruption
6. The need for a stronger economy, elimination of poverty and creation of employment opportunities
7. Good faith in partnership
8. Respect for fundamental human right
9. The need for greater efficiency in all sectors (**cont'd on page 6**)

A GLIMPSE AT ERC'S HISTORIC NATIONAL CONVERSATION, NOVEMBER 15-16 HELD AT THE GUYANA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE. LILIENDALL



PNC Parliamentarians and at far right is Ms Shelia Holder, AFC Parliamentarian participating in the National Conversation



Regional Delegates participating in the National Conversation



More delegates from all Administrative Regions at the November 15-16 National Conversation



Other delegates at the November 15-16 National Conversation