

Address - by His Excellency Professor George Maxwell Richards, TC, CMT, Ph.D on the occasion of the launch of the Environmental Commission's Informational Material, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, on Wednesday February 23rd 2005.

Thank you, Master of Ceremonies, His Honour Dr. Eugene Laurent, Commissioner, Environmental Commission

Salutations:

I am delighted to be present at this gathering, and to speak on what I regard as an important matter. Today, however, I speak not only on issues involving the environment, but comment on one positive development.

I refer to the decision by the Environmental Commission to educate the public on the role of the Commission, on its particular role in dealing with the many challenges affecting our environment, by way of the publication of a number of brochures and a video tape, and to deal with the legislative aspects of environmental management.

As you know, the Commission has prepared a variety of well-designed and readable brochures, and I have gleaned a considerable amount of information from them.

The Commission, a Superior Court of Record was established under the Environmental Management Act of 2000, with a mandate to consider and adjudicate on appeals against decisions made by the Environmental Management Authority, and also to deal with a variety of related issues.

I have also had the opportunity to peruse the 2004 Annual Report of the Commission and took particular note of the matters which came before the Commission for litigation. Deeply interested as I am in the many ecological challenges facing our small island state, I was heartened by the fairness of the various decisions.

What do I mean by fairness?

When examined, each matter had its own peculiarity; its own complication. So that for example, with respect to noise pollution, the Commission dealt with a case involving the daytime playing of a trumpet; and the nuisance of one who played her radio too loudly.

With respect to what some might consider as more serious issues, the Commission considered cases involving the discharge of effluent into drains, water courses, and sewage treatment facilities, and on an intrusion into the Nariva Swamp.

The Commission, in my opinion, considered each case as being of equal importance, and whereas all the evidence I have are the summaries in the Appendix, I have concluded, from a layman's point of view, that the Commission's approach to its work has been commendable.

Although we have all expressed delight at the information thrust of the Commission through its print and video material, I would like to offer some unsolicited advice. What is needed in addition to this material is a massive public education campaign, using the electronic media, directed at the population in general, but at the school population in particular.

I do not see this as an incursion into the territory of the EMA. I regard it rather as a programme designed to reinforce the work of the EMA, by saying clearly, that there are laws which must be observed by the entire population, and also by large commercial enterprises, whether they be oil companies, fete promoters, poultry processors, food packagers, or energy entrepreneurs.

We in this country continue to be affected by the global crisis. In an address which I delivered to some Rotarians in October 2003, I posited that climate change, will impact on Trinidad & Tobago in four ways: rising ambient temperature, sea-level rise, severe climate change, and other extreme events.

And I said on that occasion that we face the prospect of a temperature rise of some 1 to 3 degrees Celsius by the year 2010; a mean sea level rise of 30cm by 2050, and a rainfall deficit of 15% by 2100. And this was based on the best available scientific data at that time. However, this prediction was grossly underestimated with regard to temperature. **Scientists have recently reported that as at the end of last year, there was already an increase of 1 degree, which resulted in a significant melting of ice caps and the breakaway of large areas of ice in Antarctica. One area is said to be larger than the island of Manhattan.**

With regards to extreme events, shortly after the devastating Tsunami which occurred in the Far East, there was a great deal of interest in active volcanoes in the Caribbean, and we have been informed that various plans are being studied for advance warnings of earthquakes and eruptions, similar to those that exist to advise the region about developing weather systems.

Of course, the question that arises is: Having been warned of an approaching Tsunami, what can we do? The prospect of advising those who live or work on flat ground to move quickly to higher areas is terrifying and would hardly provide solutions.

The most critical environmental problem that confronts the international community today is climate change resulting from global warming caused by excessive carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.

There is now irrefutable scientific evidence of the link between CO₂ emissions and global temperature rise and the change in other climatic conditions consequent upon this. There is also a growing critical number of climate scientists who associate climate change with abnormal and disastrous weather events, e.g excessive precipitation. Though these events are often referred to as Acts of God, it is clear that they are actually Acts of Man.

In the name of economic development, Man has been abusing the environment in a profound way since the end of the Second World War, but because of its resilience, it has absorbed the abuse. But, with the environment, like the abused wife, there comes a time when she can take it no more and she retaliates.

The environment has in fact begun to rebel and it did so with a vengeance recently in the Far East and closer home as in Guyana and Venezuela. Trinidad & Tobago has been spared the worst so far, but disaster lurks as we plunge into the dry season and the vegetation of the Northern Range becomes tinder for those who callously set forest fires in their own selfish interest. The consequence will be even more landslides, soil erosion and flooding.

What we must do, Ladies and Gentlemen, is to recognize the fact that a lot can be done to prevent other catastrophic events. Consider for example, the terrible landslides and flooding which occurred earlier this year in our country, as a result of the excessive rain.

Could it be that the recent landslide episodes are an indication that those who have been espousing the theory that our Northern Range is in crisis are correct ?

To me it is an enigma that there are so many groups in this country dealing with the environment, and it seems that so little is being achieved. Many of these organisations and agencies are associated with the Environmental Management Agency. For example, we have:

The National Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan (NBSAP); Caribbean Planning for Adaptation to Global Climate Change (CPACC); The Demerara Road Project (which deals specifically with lead pollution); The Community Outreach Programme; The Cropper Foundation; People and the Northern Range; Friends of the Sea; The Trust for Sustainable Livelihoods; The Tropical Releaf Foundation; Protectors of the Environment; Sandwatch, The Wildfowl Trust; - and I am certain that this is not the entire list

Many of the organizations are associated with international bodies, and some are universally acclaimed for the work they have executed.

There is also a Green Fund, established under the Finance Act of 1987. This Fund is intended to make grants to community groups and organisations primarily

engaged in activity related to remediation, reforestation and conservation, but this fund needs to be activated and disbursements made in line with it.

It seems to me that the time has come to begin a massive reforestation programme which will alleviate land slippage and contribute in part to a reduction in flooding. Another issue, which continues to occupy my mind, is this: Has Trinidad & Tobago benefited in any way or made any changes as a result of participation and decisions at the Kyoto, RIO and SIDS Conferences?

The answer is that we have not, primarily because of the reluctance of the developed countries to fund environmental action plans in the developing world.

The North is blaming the overpopulated South for the global environmental crisis. The South is blaming over-industrialisation in the North. So that the result is a stalemate! Some funding is provided by the Global Environmental Facility, administered here by the UNDP, but the North controls the purse strings and the quantum of financial assistance is miniscule.

At international conferences, Trinidad & Tobago's delegates must function with extreme skill. Although we belong to the South, in terms of the North/South divide in CO₂ emissions, the country must manage carefully the question of pollution if we are not to be perceived as being in the camp of the North, because of our very vibrant oil and gas economy.

Trinidad & Tobago has made an outstanding contribution to the cause of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), who are specially vulnerable to sea-level rise associated with global warming and climate change.

In the Preparatory Committee meetings that preceded Rio, a former Minister of The Environment spearheaded the formation of the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS), and sowed the seeds for SIDS to be recognised as a special category of countries. This achievement has been universally applauded.

A National Environmental Action Plan with a 10-yr time frame was prepared under the auspices of the EMA in 1998 with World Bank funding. That Plan was developed with wide stakeholder consultation and we need now to pursue this plan vigorously.

For the foreseeable future, this Country must continue on the path of oil and gas exploration and production. This, however, must be balanced by ploughing back some of the oil and gas rents into global cooling activities, the most effective one being reforestation, as proposed by the Tropical Re-Leaf Foundation.

It is a fact that the biodiversity of the tropical forest specially equips it for sinking carbon from the atmosphere. Energy based Oil Companies should be encouraged to establish carbon offset plantations.

And it is noteworthy that the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago has already developed plans for establishing carbon offset plantations using local communities. First Citizen's Bank has also made a corporate decision to support community-based reforestation projects under its C.A.R.E Programme.

Large acreages of degraded forest lands in need of reforestation exist and it is my understanding that funds are available for this purpose. In this context, appropriate NGOs like the Tropical Re-Leaf Foundation could be assisted to implement its

community-based reforestation projects. As a result, oil and gas wealth would be more directly injected into the local economy. This will certainly help towards economic growth with equity.

In closing, permit me again to compliment the Commission for producing the array of brochures which have now become available, and to appeal to those responsible to undertake a national multi-media campaign designed to inform and educate all those concerned as to legal devices available to resolve a number of environmental issues.

I now have great pleasure in formally launching the Environmental Commission's Informational Material.