Guyana: can a Government of Reconciliation be Formed

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This week as the waters subside ever so slowly in Guyana, and even as the spread of water borne diseases emerge –some claimed to be reaching pandemic proportions- as charges of Governmental ineptitude, incompetence and partisanship abound, some exaggerated I’m sure, some true; as the nationals of that extremely poor and depressed society struggle to eke out an existence in what is one of the poorest societies in the hemisphere and the world; Guyanese in the Diaspora are rising admirably to the occasion, and laboring, feverishly and effectively, to mount a countervailing response to this Tsunami- like disaster.

The ambience of help, succor and aid has not been without controversy. Many –a large number, Afro Guyanese- argue that, despite the record rainfall -the worst in a century- and the concomitant flooding which would normally result; the situation has been compounded, in part, by a combination of ineptitude, partisanship, misappropriation of funds, poor governance relationship between the central Government, now controlled by the PPP East Indian dominated party, and the local bodies and municipality in Georgetown controlled largely by the opposition, all leading to a drainage, sewage and environmental situation which only aggravated the current crisis-leading to this national disaster.

Others argue that the response of the current President, Jagdeo, was ineffective and lackluster, in that he initially failed to respond to the crisis, as, for example, was exhibited by President Bush and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani the wake of the 9/11 national disaster here. Compounding this was the lack of effective and appropriate machinery to properly advise and execute effective emergency plans. Indeed, confidential sources tell me- and it has so been charged- that rather than rely on “experts”, the Government failed to correctly assess the expanding dimensions of the evolving crisis, and instead responded by delegating authority to party functionaries [albeit Cabinet ministers] who were dysfunctionally fitted for the task allocated, and who, correspondingly, responded in an ineffective and maybe latently partisan manner. This perception became such a self fulfilling prophecy that some international NGOs and donor nations, such as the USA and Canada, had to indicate to the President [Jagdeo] the need for a different response paradigm and command structure to address the situation—one that would not only do so effectively but in a clearly transparent, universal, and non partisan manner.

The Government has since made the necessary modifications, but now seems to engage in “spin’ and the framing of “accounts” in a way which now seem bent on downplaying the short and long term challenges the nation faces on the medical, housing, tourism and rehabilitative fronts. This, even as Dutch and other engineers warn that current conservancies are in poor shape and may not hold, raising the anxiety neurosis for the citizens. The attempts so far to silence one TV station from reporting the news as seen fit certainly belies, and is in defiance of, President Bush’s admonition to developing and poor nations to embrace liberty, freedom and justice. As well, it runs counter to some mandates of the conditionalities for the receipt of funds from the Millennium Account- which Guyana badly needs.

Surely a blue ribbon commission of inquiry with full subpoena powers, and comprised of members of the Guyanese exilic transnational community, should be appointed.
Intellectuals, academic and others in the Diaspora are split on their assessment, criticisms and affixation of blame. Some argue that Burnham, with all his faults, would have had the command presence to execute bold leadership and draw on experts of whatever ethnic groups in the Guyanese “plural society”. They contend that when Forbes, in his wisdom, proposed shifting the capitol to Linden, initially and then Madia, the Indian controlled opposition counterattacked by saying that this was no more than an attempt to consolidate [ethnic and political] power, than a strategic geological move by a visionary leader who commanded the respect of many ethnic groups and international others, many who were not solely Afro –Guyanese. Others contend that the PPP- Civic is no more corrupt, inefficient or shortsighted than the Burnham regime was, and try to lay all of the blame for Guyana’s woes to his [Burnham’s hegemony] –even though the PPP Civic has been in power for more than a decade, and has done its best to erase any legacy-positive notwithstanding -of the former regime. Some consulates for example, do not even carry the image of Burnham- or for that matter those of the other Presidents- in their offices, a protocol that is so normative in many nations and so essential in a “plural society” such as Guyana’s.

At every level in the Diaspora- from the House of Lords in England, the Caribbean Development Bank, the University of the West Indies, the World Bank, the Inter-American Bank, Universities and think tank institutes, state and county legislative bodies, multinational corporations at the pharmaceutical, medical and engineering levels, for example – Guyanese- extremely competent, talented and efficient -sit at the helm or in other position of leadership. This external Diaspora has been able to use the cross cutting allegiances and other centripetal traits that transcend ethnicity and race, to build a viable Guyanese transnational exilic community. They can- and have so demonstrated now and previously- be an effective resource to be tapped. Such a paradigmatic effort is already utilized by other diasporic communities-Asian Indians, Chinese, Jews, Cubans ,for example- and has been suggested and proposed by me and countless scholars, intellectuals and academics, and reiterated by Prime Minister P.J. Patterson of Jamaica in a signal lecture in New York at Medgar Evers College, CUNY, to the West Indian diasporic community. This model can be one of the ways of addressing the imbalance and challenges that these micro states now face, globally.

But this will not happen in Guyana-as even President Carter has indicated and President Bush emphasized in his second inaugural address- if the governing party now controlling the state, acts as though the right to govern is theirs exclusively, even as they flaunt so called areas of cooperation and ethnic inclusivity while trying to trump the opposition’s international calls for external aid ,pressure and scrutiny .It will now occur in this plural society- now even more riveted with racial /ethnic cleavages- if the opposition parties and groups use every advantage to magnify the Government’s shortcomings without paying due diligence to the rising suffering of many of their constituents who are facing tremendous obstacles which diminish their life chances- geometrically ,deleteriously and negatively- all the while boycotting the legislative and deliberative organs of the state. With elections approaching in 2006, it would seem that-given the current disaster in which the country is enveloped- such elections should be postponed and instead, now, a government of national reconciliation, formed for at least 5-6 years, which would then
seek to reinvolve the diasporic communities in helping the Guyanese citizenry, while seeking to collectively find a suitable pathway for poverty reduction and national development for all the nation’s citizens. This action would also signal to the G8 nations, other donor societies, and NGOs that the nation is serious about integrative national building, and about to put truth to justice in that land of tremendous potential and natural resources. The national Fathers (heroes), Jagan and Burnham, would be vindicated- for even though they both fell to the excesses of imperial manipulation, and local ethnic rivalries so endemic of “plural societies”-their ultimate longing for ONE GUYANA still resonates for many.

To paraphrase Rodney King: “Can we all get along?” I remain hopeful that Guyanese can. Give peace a chance.