

SOLID PROGRESS CONTINUES AMIDST CHALLENGES

BY

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PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**



**[Address to the Nation on the occasion of the 39th Anniversary
of Independence at Victoria Park, St. Vincent and the
Grenadines on Saturday, October 27, 2018]**

Office of the Prime Minister
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2018 INDEPENDENCE MESSAGE

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**DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

[FORMAL GREETINGS!]

Our modern, progressive, liberal-democratic nation-state known as St. Vincent and the Grenadines acceded to formal, constitutional independence thirty-nine years ago. Despite the material limitations of our small-island developing state and our excessively burdensome external challenges, including adverse climate change, we have built most assuredly a country which, according to the United Nations' human development indices, is located at the higher end of the category called "middle-income developing country".

More particularly, the material advances made in the last 18 years or so have been extraordinary, moreso in the difficult circumstances which came upon us from outside, not of our own making. The evidence is before us of our material progress in job and wealth

creation; improved living standards; education; health; housing; physical infrastructure; social equity and safety net enhancements; the dramatic reduction in indigence and undernourishment; the universal spread of water, electricity, and telecommunications; sports and culture; good governance, openness, and transparency; regional integration; and an efficacious foreign policy grounded in high principle and practical considerations. We have chalked up impressive achievements by reason of our people's hard and smart work; our practical commitment to freedom and democracy; the efforts of our diaspora scattered overseas; the assistance and solidarity of our development partners; and wise, responsible, and responsive leadership. Underpinning all of this is our people's daily reaffirmation that our nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man and woman. At Independence Day 2018, we thank God for our blessings and I congratulate our nation on its immense accomplishments!

Through the fever of history, through the travails and hardships of native genocide, African Slavery, indentured labour of Madeirans and Indians, colonialism and imperialism, we have built a free and

democratic society which has solved spectacularly the debilitating problems of intolerance, race and ethnicity, even though conflicts still arise from constellations of class, status, and patriarchy. Still pending is our just demand for reparations for native genocide and African slavery, the legacies of which have underdeveloped our nation.

Our St. Vincent and the Grenadines has adopted and adapted from universal and western values, and we have fashioned our own home-grown Vincentian and Caribbean cultural matrices. We have arrived at this historical juncture as an integrated, creolised whole, albeit with occasional dissonances; a magnificent Vincentian component of our esteemed and noble Caribbean civilisation. We have much to teach other countries as we have much to learn from them!

At Independence Day 2018, our lives, living, and production are in a better shape than they have been at any other time in our history. To be sure, there are awesome challenges, derived from internal and external sources, but our people and our government are alive to these challenges and the extant condition of all the relevant

circumstances, and we have a clear idea as to the way forward. We are not innocent of our difficulties; and we are crystal clear as to the way forward.

There are those among us who are addicted to the malaise of learned helplessness and paralyzed by contrived recitals of lamentations. Most of our people subscribe not to any of these anti-developmental impulses or maladies. Rather we elaborate and pursue a compelling developmental narrative stuffed with sensible policies and practical programmatic details. Moreover, overwhelmingly, our people, with good reason and inspired experience, believe that our Lord's compassion faileth not; morning by morning new mercies we see; all that we need His hand hath provided; great is His faithfulness. We thus apply our heart to wisdom, utilize our knowledge, embrace understanding, and work productively. This has been the tried and tested formula for good and successful living from time immemorial. It is a formula that has served well both Jews and Gentiles! We remember and thank our forebears and their leaders for their contribution in building a platform upon which we further build and advance.

Currently, a bundle of policies and programmes of our government is delivering much success, and promises to yield even more in the future. The historic Argyle International Airport (AIA) which began operations on February 14, 2017, has occasioned an increase in passengers-by-air; successful direct non-stop connections have been established between Argyle and New York and Toronto, respectively by CAL and Air Canada. On December 15th this year American Airlines begin their non-stop flight from Argyle to Miami; and other international carriers and destinations are in the offing. The doomsday pessimists have been proven wrong yet again and again about AIA.

Meanwhile the existing hotel stock is expanding; and new hotels and apartments are currently being built or are shortly to be built. The Resort at Adams Bay, Bequia, is about to be opened. The Buccament Bay Resort has finally been sorted out with new investors who are soon to take over ownership. The Black Sands Resort at Peter's Hope is under construction. The Mandarin Canouan Resort is in operation; and the Government has secured low-cost funding to

construct a 250-room brand-named hotel at Mt. Wynne and a 90-room airport hotel at Diamond. The cruise and yachting visitors are dramatically on the rise; and the top-of-the-line Glossy Bay Marina in Canouan is about to enter its first full year of operation.

Current expanded initiatives in fishing, agriculture (cocoa, coffee, root crops, and vegetables), manufacturing, and the proposed medical cannabis industry, offer solid prospects for real economic growth and job-creation. The diversified economy is growing and being placed on a sound footing. Indeed, this year, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is experiencing economic growth, albeit modest, following upon marginal to modest economic growth in each of the last seven (7) years. At the same time the government's fiscal condition has improved despite the loss of substantial resources under the Petro Caribe agreement occasioned by the unwise banking and financial sanctions against Venezuela. Amidst all our challenges, we have not gone to the International Monetary Fund nor have we sold our citizenship and passports! Our passports and citizenship are not for sale. We oppose such sale in principle and practice.

As the private and cooperative sectors, including the credit unions, continue to play a most significant role in our country's development, current initiatives by the state sector facilitate and fuel further developmental advance. Among the major game-changing endeavours of the state sector are: the consolidating and expanding of the Education, Health, and Housing Revolutions; the expanding of renewable energy (improving efficiency at hydro-electric plants (\$20 million), starting-up of the Geothermal Project (US\$ 100 million), and building-out solar installations); advancing practical plans to construct a modern cargo port (US \$145 million), and the City at Arnos Vale including the anchor project of the Acute Referral Hospital (US \$50 million); and construction of satellite warehouses for NEMO.

In the meantime, substantial and vital infrastructure work on roads, bridges, sea and river defences, is ongoing in order to strengthen our country's resilience against climate change. Indeed, between 2010 and 2017, our country has suffered loss and damage in the sum of EC \$700 million or in excess of one-third of our country's Gross Domestic Product due to storms, excessive rainfall, landslides, raging seas and rivers. The weather patterns arising from climate change

are now unfamiliar in time, type, and seasonality; unprecedented in frequency and intensity; and thus urgent beyond measure. Both the pre-existing condition of countries like St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the immediacy of climate change have given rise, most assuredly, to the many-sided concept of “Small State Exceptionalism” as a category in the global political economy which deserves an especial carve-out and recognition beyond the traditional rubric, hitherto, of “special and differential” treatment.

At a global level, climate change has, in part, redefined the issues touching on peace and security. New global security challenges, beyond those with which the world has been traditionally occupied, have come to the fore. Non-state actors, for example, have launched activities antithetical to peace and security; and states, not only so-called rogue states, have branched off into, or permitted, activities which undermine global peace and security. The circumstances are thus propitious for a small-island state to seek a role at the United Nations’ Security Council as a non-permanent member. Accordingly, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is poised to become the smallest country ever to sit on the Security Council, representing the 33-

member states of GRULAC (the Group of Latin America and the Caribbean) for the years 2020 and 2021; the elections at the General Assembly of the United Nations take place in June 2019. Our election to the Security Council would represent an extraordinary historical moment for St. Vincent and the Grenadines, all small states, and all humanity.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines stand in solidarity with all who suffer from the scourge of climate change. Last week, our Cabinet approved the sum of US \$40,000 as a mark of our solidarity with the people of Trinidad and Tobago consequent on the terrible floods which have recently afflicted them.

Fellow-Vincentians, it is painful and sobering that despite our immense progress in material and non-material terms, a small number of persons, mainly young males who are wholly unrepresentative of our nation's young male population, have chosen a life of crime, especially violent crime. They have chosen to invest in low-end but dangerous gun violence and have become "armed entrepreneurs", living illegally off the fat of the land, making

absolutely no contribution to the country's development, sucking from it, and preying on innocent law-abiding people of all walks of life. Some persons who should know better make excuses for these persons and their criminal conduct; sometimes these ridiculous excuses come close to bizarre justification. The simple fact is that neither the society nor the economy commits violent crime; it is the individual; that is where the responsibility lies. There is absolutely no reason for any person in St. Vincent and the Grenadines to be violent toward another or to rob anyone. There are enough opportunities and support systems for anyone who considers himself or herself disadvantaged. Sensible people do not buy into this so-called "disadvantaged thesis" as the cause of crimes. It is important to note that most of the violent criminals are not truly disadvantaged; they are greedy and covetous; they refuse to work; and they take some selfish pleasure in using violence against other persons. Yet, we must seek to rehabilitate them even as the legal system addresses the appropriate punishments.

It continues to be the policy of this government to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. The coercive and other

apparatuses of the state are doing their jobs. But this venture demands the practical support of all: the family, the school, the community group, the church, and the media. What we do not need are cynical political operatives and some less-than-thoughtful radio hosts who tilt at the proverbial windmills and make absurd excuses for the violent criminal, but who at the same time traduce unfairly the solid and risky anti-crime efforts of the Police. Fighting crime and criminals in a liberal democracy is not always easy but our liberal and democratic values must always be maintained in this fight against violent criminals. To be sure, the tiny band of criminals will never win. On this fundamental matter the government and people are ever more determined to constrain and defeat crime and criminals.

Having said all this, I reiterate that St. Vincent and the Grenadines is overwhelmingly a peaceful and secure part of God's earth. Let us bolster further its peace and security against the handful of violent criminals. Emphatically, we must not be dumb and soft on crime; and we stand askance from those who are playing smart with

stupidness on this issue of crime. We must strive for peace on earth; and it begins with you and me, as the popular hymn avers.

Our government continues to protect, uplift, and afford opportunities for personal development to those who find themselves in a disadvantaged condition. In this regard, a raft of initiatives exist which are fit for the purpose; the recently-established Zero Hunger Trust Fund is performing excellently and offers more than a ray of hope for its beneficiaries. I urge all persons, young, old, and middle-aged, men and women, who face onerous challenges in their lives and living to seek the support and assistance from one or more of the relevant government's agencies and programmes. Seek and you will find; knock and opportunities are available. Still, remember always that you must make the maximum individual effort in order to better your life and living. Young persons, in particular, are being urged to take full advantage of the bountiful, lawful opportunities available.

Fellow Vincentians, I have a few timely announcements to make:

First, is the issue of the non-appointment of scores of graduate teachers. Last year I announced that those who were hitherto not formally appointed would be appointed in annual batches over a three-year period. This year (2018) over 100 graduate teachers who obtained their university degrees prior to, up to, and including, 2012, have been appointed. As of January 2019, another 120 or so graduate teachers will be so appointed in respect of those who obtained their university degrees in 2013, 2014, and 2015. And in January 2020, the remainder of the graduate teachers will be appointed as such. Thereafter, they will be appointed as a matter of course.

Secondly, the programme of facilitating farmers, who were accorded leases of agricultural lands, to obtain freehold title for those lands, continues apace. Further, later today at the Chatoyer National Park at Rabacca, some 120 persons will be allotted individual lots of land for housing construction. Some 5,000 lots of land have been distributed to deserving beneficiaries since March 2001. This is absolutely remarkable! An explosion of housing has occurred among

the poor, the working people, the middle-income earners, and young persons!

Thirdly, for students now pursuing the four-year Bachelor's Degree in Nursing, the Government will pay one-third of the already subsidised fees in addition to providing for them monthly stipend of EC \$1,000 per month as was done hitherto with the RN and Associate Degree programmes. Further, supporting loans are available from the Economically Disadvantaged Student' Loan Programme. Clearly, nurses have been especially privileged in the pursuit of their education. Recruitment from our surplus of nurses to the United Kingdom will begin shortly.

Fourth, this year the government has made available the highest number of awards ever __ 48 __ at one time, to students who sat the CAPE and Associate Degrees in 2018. There are 17 National Scholarship, 11 National Exhibitions, and Bursaries. This package amounts to approximately EC \$7.1 million. This is a huge investment in the 48 outstanding students in these 2018 Examinations; additionally, their economic costs are paid annually

to UWI or other universities. This brings the overall package to in excess of \$10 million — absolutely remarkable. Of course, several millions of dollars more are spent on university education for other students; and other scholarships, tuition grants, and divers forms of assistance (including student loans) are always offered.

Fifth, my government is determined to bolster further the financial assistance granted to its employees (civil servants, police officers, teachers, nurses, nursing assistants) who are pursuing undergraduate studies at the degree, diploma or certificate level in approved priority subject areas at accredited institutions online, at the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College or at the UWI Open Campus. This assistance would amount to up to one-half of the cost of each course which is successfully completed.

Sixth, in an effort to boost private sector investment in the fishing industry, the Government has decided to accord a 100 percent duty-free concession to Vincentians on fishing vessels. This will surely stimulate more substantial fishing. The pirogues which use outboard

motor engines up to 115 horse power already receive 75 percent duty free concession.

Seventh, as a companion to the Pan Against Crime Initiative, the Government will in 2019 implement a comprehensive “Sport Against Crime” Initiative in conjunction with those sporting associations which are interested in so doing. Two such national sporting associations have so far raised the matter with me.

Eighth, the Government will shortly establish a National Committee on the Re-naming of Buildings, Roads, and Parks to reflect the post-colonial condition of our peoples. It is high time to alter the nomenclature of colonials; even the names of minor colonials are on our streets and some villages. This is absolutely ridiculous in the 21st century!

Ninth, Ian Allen, our former West Indies test cricketer, is now hereby appointed as a Sports Ambassador. At the same time we send “Independence Day” greetings to three of our nationals who are currently touring India with the West Indies Cricket Team: Sunil

Ambris, Jomel Warrican, and Obed Mc Coy; Obed is actually playing One Day International today. We express condolences to Sunil and his family on the recent passing of his father, Walford Ambris.

Tenth, the date for the commencement of the duty-free concession on Christmas barrels is November 12, 2018; the concession will run until December 31, 2018. Last year, over 20,000 persons benefitted from such concession.

Fellow Vincentians, on Independence Day 2018, I urge all of us to reflect carefully on, and learn from, all the factors and circumstances which have ensured our continued progress despite serious challenges, mainly externally-sourced, but also home-grown. This blessed place called St. Vincent and the Grenadines is our home; this place belongs to us; we own it; it is up to us to make it better, to make it the best it can be. People and governments from other lands may help us but no one owes us a living. To be sure, there are global challenges which all of Earth's peoples must work together to address and overcome wholly or partially. But at the end of the day, we Vincentians have the primary obligation to take care of our own

affairs. We have been doing so fairly well, but each of us must do better today than yesterday, to do the best we can. There are abundant possibilities and strengths in our condition despite weaknesses and limitations.

I reiterate what I said in my last year's address: *"Be optimistic, not pessimistic; be positive in our attitude, not negative; be upbeat, not borne down by lamentations; think and act creatively, push the outer limits of our possibilities; do not allow limitations to encumber you. Beware of false prophets and the apostles of gloom and doom; avoid those, in whatever political garb they come, who pull down St. Vincent and the Grenadines and who never see anything good, only bad. Beware of those who wish the worse for us, those who would see our country burn, metaphorically, only for them to be kings and queens of the resulting ashes. Such persons are always in a condition of permanent dissatisfaction and who have nothing in them but a self-absorbed personal agenda which is unlikely ever to be satisfied. Listen not to those types; stay true to your positive self!"*

Today is a day that the Lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice in it.

Happy Independence 2018, SVG!