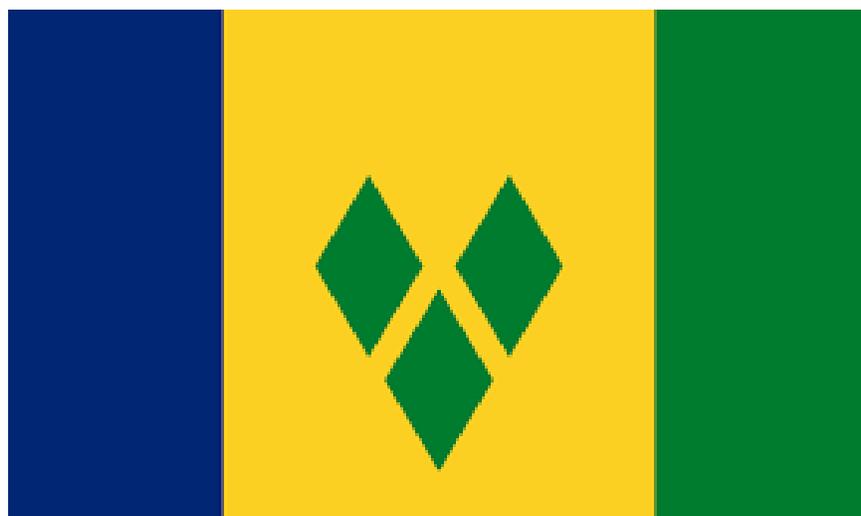


OUR PEOPLE'S RESILIENCE AND FORTITUDE AT A TIME OF RESPAIR

by

**Dr. The Hon. Ralph E. Gonsalves
Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines**



[Address on the Occasion of the 43rd Anniversary of Independence of
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on October 27, 2022
At Victoria Park]

Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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[FORMAL GREETINGS]

Today, October 27, 2022, we commemorate and celebrate the forty-third anniversary of our country’s reclamation of its independence. Across our lands and seas, despite our travails, our people rejoice, and are grateful, for our blessings. In our homes and our churches we affirm individually: “[...And] *all my life you have been faithful; and all my life you have been so, so good, with every breath that I am able; Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God.*”

The theme for this year's anniversary focuses on our people's resilience and fortitude which have been evident over the years, but especially so during the extraordinary difficult period since March 2020, and continuing. "Resilience" means "the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties"; it is a reflection of our admirable "toughness". "Fortitude" refers to our people's "courage in pain or adversity"; it signifies our strength, individually and collectively.

On March 11, 2020, the dreaded and dangerous pandemic of COVID-19 descended upon us from outside; although it has abated markedly in recent times, this public health challenge is still with us; so, too, its medical, social, educational, economic, and security consequences. In April 2021, the La Soufriere volcano erupted cataclysmically numerous times causing one-fifth of our population or some 20,000

persons to be evacuated from the Red and Orange Zones, and accommodated elsewhere, mainly in eighty-seven public shelters, for at least six months; immense physical devastation, economic hardship, and suffering thus resulted. On July 2, 2021, Hurricane Elsa struck the north-east of St. Vincent causing further damage. Later in 2021 into early 2022, there were alternating periods of drought and excessive rainfall accompanied by dangerous, damaging landslides. On February 24, 2022, the military action by the Russian Federation against Ukraine exacerbated extraordinary turmoil in the global political economy with harmful knock-on economic and social effects for the Caribbean and elsewhere, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Since then, the world's economy has been plunged into a terrible tail-spin amidst the beckoning of a potential nuclear Armageddon.

None of these calamities which has attended our way has been of our own making; they have all come upon us as the proverbial thieves in the night, without warning, but with a pain and suffering almost, but not quite, beyond our endurance. These multiple blows were delivered against us in the context of the fragilities and vulnerabilities of a small island developing state, inclusive of the debilitating impacts of climate change and the harshness of a rampaging monopoly casino capitalism, globally. Moreover, we have been labouring under the awful, enduring, historical legacies of underdevelopment arising from colonialism, native genocide, and the enslavement of African bodies; thus, our legitimate, and justiciable, demand for reparations from the coloniser country.

Still, despite all our huge challenges, we have been surviving and thriving, year-by-year, month-by-month, day-by-day, sweet Jesus! We have been doing so through our own efforts in concert with the practical solidarity of our regional and international partners for which we are grateful and thankful. We have been pursuing, with focus, a path consistent with the internationally-agreed 17 Sustainable Development Goals, at the core of which has been our quest to build a modern, competitive, many-sided, post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional, and global. Each word in that formulation is pregnant with real meaning and import.

From the deep valley of convulsions, dislocations, and even despair among many over the past 2½ years, our people's resilience, fortitude, and fresh hope — yes, fresh hope — have been summoned in aid of recovery,

rebuilding, and more. As we climb out of the valley of extreme difficulties onto the mountain of achievements, the evidence abounds that much better times are at hand. For example, in this year, 2022, the economy will grow by a commendable 5 percent; next year, 2023, further economic growth is projected at 6 percent; and in 2024, economic growth of 4.8 percent is forecast. Only the downside risks associated with the vagaries of nature and global turmoil combined with our own self-inflicted follies of crime, violence, senseless disunity and manufactured confusion by aberrant individual and fellow-travellers, could derail us.

Our material well-being is on the mend: We are slated to return, by next year, to a Gross Domestic Product of 2019, a condition from which we descended by way of a major economic contraction in 2020 — the first

COVID year — followed by the disasters — volcanic and hurricane — of 2021. We thank God for His mercies of restoration, rebuilding, and respairing!

Before our very eyes, advances are being made in vital areas such as agriculture and fisheries; hotel development; manufacturing; the construction of a modern port; urban development; sea defences and river defences; school rehabilitation and construction; the building of a modern hospital; the rehabilitation of airports; housing and community amenities; roads and bridges; renewable energy; telecommunications and water; climate change adaptation and mitigation; disaster preparedness; the creative arts and entertainment; sports and recreation; the strengthening of democracy, good governance, the judicial system, and citizen security; the fortifying of regional integration; and the expansion of foreign

relations and foreign trade in goods and services. Over the next three years, hugely significant capital investments, some already in train, by the public, private, and cooperative sectors will continue or start-up, in furtherance of economic transformation, job and wealth creation, and an even more equitable distribution of economic rewards. At the same time, the social safety nets for the poor, the indigent, the vulnerable, and the aged are being broadened and strengthened most assuredly.

Amidst economic growth, and transformation, we must continue to act prudently and responsibly. It is to be expected that we will immediately consume, reasonably, a portion of this increased bounty, but some of it we must put aside for the proverbial “rainy day”, and much of it we ought to invest so as to enhance further economic development, inclusive of

labour and management productivity. We must never ignore or downplay our economy's weaknesses and limitations as we seek to maximise its strengths and possibilities.

As we go forward, we note enhanced benefits and material improvements, immediate and prospective.

These include:

1. The agreement with the public sector unions for a salary increase of 7 percent distributed over the next three years, 2023 to 2025, inclusive.

2. A reduction in personal income taxes in two ways:
 - (a) An increase in the income threshold from \$20,000 to \$22,000 annually, below which no income taxes are to be paid; and
 - (b) a reduction in

the top rate of income and corporate tax from 30 percent to 28 percent.

3. The establishment of the Wages Councils to review minimum wages. Wage increases arising from this process will commence from 2023.

4. The income support for 5,400 families (4,000 in the Red and Orange zones, and 1,400 who were specifically affected by COVID in the Green and Yellow Zones and the Grenadines) will continue to receive their monthly benefits by way of the BOSVG bank cards until December 31, 2022. Our 2023 Budget will address a possible further extension.

Today, I formally announce other enhancements, supports, and initiatives, in diverse areas:

1. As of January 1, 2023, the YES volunteers will receive an increase on their stipend of an additional \$150 monthly; so, too, the Mobilisers and Coordinators in the YES Programme. This increase will cost the Treasury in excess of \$1 million annually.

2. A moratorium has been put in place in respect of payment by dialysis patients at the Modern Medical and Diagnostic Centre at Georgetown for the four-month period September 1st to December 31st, 2022. There are currently 47 patients on dialysis at MMDC. This free dialysis treatment will cost the revenue some \$250,000 for this four-month period in consumables alone. Consideration is being favourably given to extending this moratorium into 2023. We cannot

allow our brothers and sisters to suffer without any relief or to die on account of the fact that they cannot afford dialysis treatment. Matthew Chapter 25 guides us in every material particular.

3. The number of national scholarships, national exhibitions, special awards, and bursaries awarded on the basis of CAPE and Associate degree results for 2022 has been increased from 62 in 2021 to 73 in 2022. Of these, the number of national scholarships (fully funded 5-year university scholarships) has tripled from 7 in 2021 to 21 in 2022; these 21 scholarships alone are valued at approximately \$12.5 million. The 73 awards are in addition to the 940 tuition scholarships recently granted by our government and the several dozens (roughly 200) of other new university scholarships, grants, and economic

disadvantaged student loans for university students. We are investing mightily in our young people. We urge them to soar with their wings unclipped. We teach them that although they are better than no one, none is better than them. They are the treasured children of our Caribbean civilisation. They will always have our abundant support.

4. The imminent arrival of 40,000 sacks of urea from Venezuela for distribution to farmers.

5. The delivery of some 15,000 barrels (524,565 imperial gallons) of oil earlier this week through the resumed Petro Caribe Agreement which will reduce the extent of the electricity bill to consumers.

6. The immediate continuation of the housing repair and housing construction programme for persons affected primarily by the volcanic eruptions last year. In all, some 1,400 house-owners will benefit. A recent visit by Ministers and officials to Guyana was connected to this housing programme.

7. The pursuance of carefully-calibrated pension reform, including a periodic review of the National Insurance Services which is likely to lead to an enhancement of benefits for retirees.

8. The on-going roll-out of specific programmes to support ever more farmers, fishers, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, including women.

9. As of Monday, October 31, 2022, gasoline at the pump will be reduced by \$2.10 per gallon, and diesel by \$1.00 per gallon. [Gasoline will be \$16.06 per gallon, and diesel \$16.16 per gallon.]
10. The aggregate payment before Christmas 2022 of over \$1 million to persons who volunteered at the various shelters during the time of volcanic eruptions; this practical way of saying “thanks” is long overdue. A verification of the correspondence of the names with their identification cards, is being finalised.
11. The continued support in the form of subsidies or tax waivers for a range of commodities including brown sugar, flour, fertiliser, and cement.

12. The duty-free concessions on Christmas barrels will commence on Monday, November 14, 2022.

13. Cabinet has instructed the officials in the Ministry of Finance to finalise with the Nurse Midwives an especial allowance for them to be paid from January 1, 2023; they deserve it. Similarly, too, suitable arrangements for transportation for nurses are being worked out with urgency.

14. The appointment of two Sporting Ambassadors: Woodrow “Keelee” Williams and Obed Mc Coy; and one Cultural Ambassador, Shertz “Problem Child” James.¹

These initiatives, and more, reflect a truism that in our small nation we are all in this enterprise of life, living,

¹ Note: The announcement of these appointments was done later that morning at the Toast to the Nation at the Official Residence of the Prime Minister.

and production, together. It was an American President, Theodore Roosevelt, who in 1901 addressed aptly this home-truth at a time of great challenges, thus:

“The fundamental rule in our national life — the rule which underlies all others — is that, on the whole, and in the long run, we shall go up or down together. There are exceptions; and in times of prosperity some will prosper far more, and in times of adversity some will suffer far more, than others; but speaking generally a period of good times means that all share more or less in them, and in a period of hard times all feel the stress to a greater or less degree.”

Fellow-Vincentians, in every civilisation, including our own, beyond the economic order, and the formal

institutions of state and society, there is a fluid space in the people's consciousness awash with possibilities beyond the ordinary, the regular, the normal, the usual. It is this fluid space from which the genius of our people manifests itself and flourishes. It is this existential spirit and yearning from which we must draw, individually and collectively, in our embrace of fresh hope, in our respairing; it is that which encompasses a social individualism and solidarity beyond an atomised individualism of dog-eat-dog selfishness or disregard of the society's well-being as a whole.

This genius of our people prompts the recognition that we are all on the dangerous, metaphoric road to Jericho; we have to look out for one another; we cannot be like the priest, the Levite, or the lawyer who uncaringly passes the wounded and the robbed; we

must be like the Good Samaritan who helps to the best of his or her ability. This fluid space of the people's genius contains, upliftingly, an instinctive social solidarity and critical thought; that space, too, possesses debilitating, backward instincts and uncritical thinking wedded to pristine individualism and empty rationalisation to fit pre-conceived prejudices. Which of these instincts will prevail? The worse or the better? We will always try for better not bitter!

In our embracing of fresh hope, in our respairing, in our recovery and building back stronger and better, we must draw out from our people's genius new and more productive attitudes to work, study, production, management, and leadership. Like an ever-present noise in our blood, and echo in our bones, there must be the full recognition of the truth that no society, no

civilisation, has ever progressed on the basis of laziness, pleasure, leisure, and “nice time”; on the other hand, we must always extol hard and smart work at all levels, from the ground floor up to top managerial posts, in communion and interaction with each other and nature, and by the application of the best or most appropriate technology. In this better way, we lay the basic foundation for the material advancement of the society.

Fellow-Vincentians, we know the truism that “men and women cannot live by bread alone”. The leaders in our churches teach us this sensibly and well, and point us to the divine redeeming grace. In our temporal world we must embrace similarly an uplifting national spirit of confidence in who and what we are and the requisite of the vital importance of symbols in national life. I will continue to affirm, unequivocally, that although

we are not better than anybody, no one else anywhere is better than us. Assuredly, we must value the highest office in this land, that of citizenship, not in any narrow parochial manner, but in a highly esteemed way; we must not fall prey to the temptation of selling it like potatoes, eddoes, or jackfish and so destroy our existential soul in the process. Similarly, our passport, the treasured symbol of the inward grace of our citizenship, is not for sale by this government. And we will never hang out a “For Sale” sign in any window at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in respect of any aspect of our patrimony. New hegemons are on the horizon to tempt us with shadows and mirages inimical to our interests. We cannot rail against the evil of neo-colonialism and imperialism only to open the door for newer hegemons.

Meanwhile, at this time of respair, we encourage, and celebrate, the achievements galore of our people, especially the young, at work, academics, sports, culture, business, and other productive enterprises. The genius of our people continues to flourish.

At this our time of respairing, of the embrace of fresh hope, we will address in an urgent and focused way the naming of the recommended National Heroes, the creation of a system of locally-shaped national honours, and the appropriate re-naming of several public spaces, which continue to carry out-moded, completely irrelevant, and even self-debasing colonial names. The time and season have come for all of this.

The government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines are now at a time of RESPAIR — an embrace of fresh hope after a period of immense

difficulties for our nation. This fresh hope is conjoined with an abiding faith made manifest in works and an unbreakable love for our country — a love that looks on tempests and is never shaken. Assuredly, the following will see us to victory: Our resilience; our existential spirit to triumph over seemingly impossible odds; our hard and smart works; our strength of commitment to bedrock values of upliftment; visionary and experienced leadership; and our reaffirmation that this nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man and woman. Morning by morning new mercies we see! Great is His faithfulness!

Those of us who are wise elders with commendable track records of achievement will continue to work in close tandem with those of the younger generations, oft-times to lead and to guide, but always to learn from

them so as together to lift SVG higher, particularly at this time of RESPAIR.

Fellow Vincentians, be advised:

*“Whoever watches the wind will not plant;
whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.
“---Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.”*

[Ecclesiastes, chapter 11; verses 4 and 6]

Happy Independence Day 2022, SVG! Long live the Magnificent People of Our SVG and the Caribbean!