

BY

UNITY LABOUR PARTY

THE ISSUE

Today, July 24, 2024, just over three weeks since Hurricane beryl delivered devastation and destruction to SVG, particularly in the Southern Grenadines, but also on Bequia and St. Vincent, remarkable progress has been made, thus far, in the process of relief, recovery, and reconstruction, the discrete yet overlapping phases of turning the terrible setback into a sustainable advance.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES AND SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION BILL

On July 18th and 19th, 2024, the House of Assembly debated and passed, with unanimous approval, the Supplementary Estimates and Supplementary Appropriation Bill 2024 to address immediate relief and early recovery from Beryl's havoc, damage, pain and suffering. These "Supplementaries", totalling EC \$136.45 million, are funded largely by EC \$50 million from the Contingencies Fund, EC \$37 million in loans (local and external), EC \$44 million in grants (largely through \$14 million from Taiwan and \$13.5 million from a wealthy home-owner on Canouan), and EC \$5.0 million from a pay-out on a regional insurance arrangement.

Additionally, the House passed an amendment to the Public Sector Loans Act raising the ordinary borrowing limit by EC \$70 million to the sum of EC \$225 million, and the overdraft limit of the government by EC \$20 million to EC \$85 million, to meet the exigencies of the post-Beryl situation.

These sums raised are additional to the existing 2024 Estimates and Appropriation Bill which were passed respectively in December 2023 and January 2024. Significant sums of money from the existing Budget are being repurposed to address Beryl's devastation and destruction.

It is to be noted that amidst all the urgent endeavors of relief and early recovery by the government, its leadership was able to prepare, and conclude, in less than three weeks after Beryl's landfall, the parliamentary approval of the requisite immediate resources. Our government did the same thing in roughly the same timeframe after the first COVID death in March 2020, and the volcanic eruptions of April 2021. Undoubtedly, activist and focused governance in emergency or disaster conditions by the ULP government.

PRAISES FROM THE IMF ON GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

On the evening of Wednesday July 17, 2024, the government received a post-Beryl “Supplementary Information Report” to the earlier 2024 Article IV Consultation Report by the staff of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This “Supplementary Information” by the IMF made four basic but significant points: (i) Hurricane Beryl left major destruction on SVG primarily in the Southern Grenadines; (ii) the government authorities responded swiftly to the emergency caused by Beryl; (iii) past efforts to build financial resilience, and assistance from the international community are helping the authorities to finance disaster relief; and (iv) the thrust of the IMF staff’s favourable appraisal on the trajectory of the economy remains broadly unchanged, and the government authorities’ prompt crisis responses follow closely their contingency plan.

In the latter regard, the “Supplementary Information” avers:

“While the hurricane caused large physical damage the IMF staff’s current assessment suggests that the impact on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) might be relatively contained, considering that the post-hurricane reconstruction efforts would support activity, similarly to the experience with the swift responses to the volcanic eruptions of 2021. The near-term fiscal deficit and financing needs are likely to rise, while public debt — although elevated — is expected to remain sustainable considering the use of Contingencies Fund and some grants.

“----Once the recovery is on a solid footing, the government authorities intend to undertake measures to enhance debt sustainability and rebuild buffers.”

This very positive perspective of the IMF is helpful to government’s efforts to secure additional resources externally.

MORE RESOURCES NEEDED

The government preliminarily estimates that it will require in excess of an additional EC \$750 million to address the immediate relief, recovery, and partial, though substantial, reconstruction. The recovery and reconstruction phases will focus in the short-to-medium term on: Rebuilding government’s physical infrastructure (damaged educational institutions, clinics, police stations, tourism sites, agriculture infrastructure, government buildings, airports, wharfs); effecting a full clean-up programme; restoring and sustaining electricity, water, health, sanitation, security, and telecoms services; delivering quality access to educational services in the affected areas; addressing the housing needs of the affected populations; providing and maintaining an acceptable level of social protection to affected persons and families; rebuilding the economic infrastructure and production especially in agriculture, tourism, and fisheries; providing production and income supports respectively to affected enterprises

(business people, farmers, fisherfolk) and workers; pursuing especial initiatives for persons in the Grenadines, young people, and women; and providing vital psycho-social support to affected persons.

At the same time as recovery and partial reconstruction proceed, relief continues for persons in shelters and evacuees in private homes or guest houses.

Of the additional \$750 million or so required for all of this, the government has identified actual or probable/likely sources of funds, immediately, in the sum of approximately EC \$400 million. We are on the hunt for the identification of the gap resources of some EC \$350 million or more.

Still, these sums do not cover the restoration from the damage to the rivers, and the sea coasts, and economic loss. Bear in mind, too, that a conservative estimate of EC \$400 million is required for housing alone. That is a vital area in the recovery and reconstruction plans.

WHERE ARE WE ON THE GROUND AFTER THREE WEEKS?

Immense progress has been made thus far: Security, food, water, and basic health, are secured everywhere; the clean-up is almost complete in Canouan; it is advanced in Mayreau; and in Union it is progressing well and is expected to be concluded by way of a 40-day plan; the clean-up teams in Canouan consist of 200 workers, in Mayreau, 80 workers; in Union Island, 400 workers.

Electricity is being gradually restored in Canouan and Mayreau; in Union, progress is being made towards some restoration.

Repairs and reconstruction of important government buildings are proceeding in Canouan, Mayreau, and Union Island; so, too, in Bequia, and on SVG. Telecoms services are being gradually restored in the Southern Grenadines; it is restored, more or less, elsewhere. Public health, including the treatment of spaces for mosquitoes, is being attended to; and a field hospital has been set up at Ashton, Union Island.

EDUCATION

On the educational front, the situation is as follows:

- (i) Repairs and rebuilding processes have commenced on the primary and secondary schools at Canouan and Union Island, and on the primary school at Mayreau;
- (ii) Repairs/rebuilding on the former Teacher's College building at Arnos Vale to house the 240 primary school students from the two primary

schools on Union Island, and the 202 secondary schools from Union Island and Mayreau.

The government is holding consultations with parents of students from Union Island (primary and secondary) and Maureau (secondary) who are on St. Vincent on Wednesday July 24th, and with the parents who are still on Union and Mayreau, at Union Island on Thursday July 25th. The purpose of the consultations is to assist in determining whether students attend school on Union Island or on St. Vincent.

The government is recommending that students who attend the two primary schools and the secondary school on Union Island are to attend repurposed schools at Anos Vale, St. Vincent, until the housing and other facilities for life and living are suitably available on Union Island. The government is so advising on the ground of practicality based on three bedrock principles: (i) The interest of the students is paramount; (ii) the education of the students from the Southern Grenadines must not be placed in a less advantageous position than for the students elsewhere in SVG; and (iii) the care, welfare, health and security of these students must not be placed in a less advantageous position than for the students elsewhere in SVG. It is our view that the housing and other facilities suitable for teaching/learning cannot be put in place within one month before school starts in September 2024. It is our plan to house the 450 or so students, their parents, and, teaches in guest houses and private homes. It is an expansive exercise. Perhaps, we may end up with schools for the students on both Union and St. Vincent. But it is not practical to build 450 homes on Union Island in one month to house students and parents before the next school term begins on September 2, 2024; that is the crux of the problem.

STATE – PRIVATE SECTOR – COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Progress is being made, remarkably, because of the partnership between the State, the private sector, and the community, including non-governmental organisations and activist individuals. On Canouan, the Police, Revenue Officer, other state officials, private sector (personnel from the Marina establishment, a wealthy homeowner, local business persons, and activists from the community are at the operational centre at the Police station, headed by Sgt. Timm. On Mayreau, a similar organizational structure exists with the premises of Eden Rest (Youth with a Mission), an evangelical-based group from overseas, as the locale for the operational centre; this centre is led by Marion Isaacs. On Union Island, a similar organisational structure with its headquarters at the compound of the terminal building at the airport, is led by Supt. Samuel. The Director of Grenadines Affairs, Edwin Snagg, and the Deputy Director, Carlos Williams, play important roles in the Southern Grenadines and Bequia, respectively. All these groupings are linked directly to NEMO.

The owners of Palm Island have laid out a plan for the reconstruction of that island. The Prime Minister has been briefed on the plan. The owners of PSV have yet to present a similar plan to the government.

SUMMATION

Over the ensuing days, weeks, and months the recovery and reconstruction will proceed apace in tandem with ongoing relief to affected persons in appropriate material particulars. The Executive (the Cabinet), the administrative arm and agencies of the state, and the Parliament will lead in accordance with their respective constitutional and legal obligations. In this mix, NEMO has a central role in disaster management; each line-Ministry has its particular functions in relief, recovery, and reconstruction. At the apex of it all is the Office of the Prime Minister which leads and coordinates. All of this is being done with links to the regional and international communities. Above all, the joinder of the government and our national community is the most important manifestation of a robust solidarity. We expect that the Opposition will conduct itself in a responsible, non-divisive manner in the Parliament and the national community on the tasks-at-hand; Opposition parliamentarians may interface appropriately with the various agencies of governments in their representative capacities. There is, of course, understandably, no government of national unity. Yet the people must be united in solidarity for undoubted national endeavours.

The government places a very high premium on social solidarity in the exercise of relief, recovery, and reconstruction. It has zero tolerance for non-Vincentian entities or persons who consider themselves a law-unto-themselves with false assumptions of authority, possessed of an egotistical go-it-alone agenda, gripped by a mania of subverting collaboration efforts, and act injurious to peace, order, and good governance. A few aliens seem to think, mistakenly, that before they arrived in SVG there was no functioning civilisation. When faced with such anti-national behaviour, the State will respond robustly and swiftly, in accordance with law and sensible practice, in the people's interest.

Meanwhile the guiding posts are unity and solidarity towards a defined people-centred goal. Our watchwords are faith, fresh hope, and love.