

BY

UNITY LABOUR PARTY

THE ISSUE: RELIEF, RECOVERY, RECONSTRUCTION

Hurricane Beryl's devastation of the Southern Grenadines and its destruction elsewhere in SVG on July 1, 2024, have occasioned the immediate rolling out of relief for affected persons and the early beginnings of the process of recovery and reconstruction. Over the current phase of our country's life, living and production, the focus is on the THREE Rs: Relief, Recovery, Reconstruction, in tandem with our ongoing programme of sustainable development in every material particular.

The quest is to turn the terrible setbacks caused by Beryl into a sustained advance in the interest of our people's humanization. So, let us map, summarily, what has been done in the first days, so far, what is now being done, and what is planned to be done by our government in full communion with our people, in exemplary solidarity, supported by the efforts of our diaspora and our friends (governments and organisations) overseas.

IMMEDIATE RELIEF

Immediately upon the predicted arrival of Beryl, the National Emergency Management Council of NEMO met, under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister. Right away, too, the hurricane shelters were activated; within hours, nearly two thousand persons were in 75 shelters across SVG, and ongoing relief of food, water, and other items of emergency support, delivered. It is estimated that more than twice that number found refuge temporarily in homes of friends and families. The communication challenges (air and sea

transport, telecommunications) between St. Vincent and the Southern Grenadines (Canouan, Mayreau, Union Island, Petit St. Vincent, and Palm Island) and the scale of the devastation on those southern islands, delayed the flow of relief supplies for 24 hours to the people thereon. They had to rely on the resources (material and organisational) which were resident among them.

By Wednesday morning (July 3rd), within 48 hours of the passage of destruction Beryl, the Fast Ferry, Jaden Sun, with a capacity for 200 passengers was contracted by the government to evacuate persons desirous of leaving the Southern Grenadines for St. Vincent, and to enhance communication linkages. The Fast Ferry covers the 40-mile distance between St. Vincent and Union Island in 90 minutes. Other ferries — Gem Star and Bequia Express — were also mobilized to transport cargo and persons. These services are paid for by the government. Gem Star was also contracted by the World Food Programme of the United Nations to transport supplies from Barbados to SVG. By Saturday morning (July 6th), it was estimated that over 1,000 persons had been evacuated from Union Island. Most were housed by friends and families on St. Vincent, but others were accommodated at five hurricanes shelters.

By the evening of Sunday (July 7th), the number of persons in shelters had dwindled to some 1,300, and the number of shelters reduced to 42. Many persons returned to their homes on St. Vincent and Bequia. Indeed, by then, too, many of our compatriots from the Southern Grenadines moved from shelters on St. Vincent to private homes of friends and families. Unfortunately, the government was unable to secure rooms in guest houses or apartments; they were all booked for the Carnival season.

Importantly, organizational structures involving NEMO, the Police, the private sector, and activist individuals were functioning on the islands of Bequia, Canouan, Mayreau, and Union Island — in the latter case, there was a shocked hiatus for about 36 hours or so. At the centre on SVG, NEMO was, and is, fully operational; indeed, the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) was promptly established, as required under the NEMO Act, 72 hours before the arrival of Beryl.

Importantly, too, security was strengthened throughout SVG; especially so in the islands of the Southern Grenadines. Emergency support arrived from the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), the Regional Security System (RSS), and other regional entities. All leave was cancelled for police officers. They had to manage the normal situation of law and order, the elevated/high alert patrols for particular criminal activities, the Carnival, and the requisites of security and disaster management consequent upon Beryl.

CABINET DECISIONS ON WEDNESDAY JULY 3RD

A raft of critical decisions was made by Cabinet at its meeting of July 3rd, 2024, which was dedicated exclusively to Beryl. These decisions include:

1. The contracting of the Fast Ferry, Gem Star, and Bequia Express to transport passengers, goods, and materials.
2. Duty-free waivers on all relief supplies.
3. Duty-free barrels from now until December 31, 2024.
4. Duty-free waivers on chainsaws, jackhammers, generators, water tanks, and other like equipment/tools.
5. Purchase of 3 pick-ups (two for Union Island, one for Canouan) and four dump trucks (3-tons and 4-tons) for Southern Grenadines.
6. Release of first \$15 million of an allocated \$50 million from the Contingency Fund.
7. Identification of sources of financing required for Relief, Recovery, and Reconstruction. Hundreds of millions of dollars required.

8. First bundle of Supplementary Estimates and a Supplementary Appropriation Bill for 100-day relief and elements of recovery to be scheduled for Parliament on July 18, 2024.
9. Repurposing of some monies already in the existing Budget 2024.
10. Resolution for Parliament to increase Overdraft Limit of government.
11. Minister of Finance to engage banks, credit unions, and other financial institutions for forbearance on loans for affected persons.
12. A multiplicity of decisions regarding Security, Shelters, Disaster Management, Clean-up programme of Rubble, Electricity, Water, Telecoms, Evacuation of Persons from Southern Grenadines, Primary and Secondary Education for students in Southern Grenadines, Public Health, etc.
13. Damage Assessment.
14. Coordination of critical work with CARICOM, OECS, CDEMA, RSS, United Nations Agencies, and global non-governmental organisations such as the World Central Kitchen.
15. Allowing Carnival to proceed but in accord with security requisites set by the Commissioner of Police.
16. In addition to the general framework for relief, recovery and reconstruction, specific plans are being fashioned for the special circumstances of Union Island, Mayreau and Canouan.
17. Prime Minister to effect, and oversee, the active engagement with leaders regionally and globally on Relief, Recovery, and Reconstruction. The PM to urge international support, too, for Grenada, Carriacou, and Petit Martinique.

CRITICAL NEED FOR HOUSING

In the Southern Grenadines there is a population in excess of 5,000 persons. The 2012 Census placed the number over 4,000; in the last 12 years, there has been internal migration towards the Southern Grenadines. In the 2012 Census, the data showed that there was an average of 2.5 persons per household in the Southern Grenadines.

In terms of the number of households and businesses in the Southern Grenadines, the best proxy is the number of active accounts at VINLEC as follows: Canouan, 1038; Mayreau, 142; Union Island, 1,315; thus, a total of 2,495 accounts, the bulk of which, by far, are household accounts.

The government estimates that some 2,000 houses in the Southern Grenadines require rebuilding in whole or in substantial part. Between Bequia and St. Vincent, it is estimated that the corresponding number is in excess of 600 houses. It is further estimated that no more than one-quarter has any, or any adequate, insurance. Thus, about 2,000 home-owners are likely to have no insurance support; and the bulk of the others, by far, have little or no material resources to start their rebuilding process right away. As has been the policy, and the record, of the ULP government, we assist tremendously, including the actual building of houses severely damaged or destroyed.

In the Southern Grenadines, building costs are at least 50 percent higher than on St. Vincent, and perhaps 30 percent above the building costs in Bequia. From the above figures, and the actual condition of the housing stock, one can deduce reasonably, that there are 1,000 houses in the Southern Grenadines which are likely to require government's support to rebuild completely and another 500 requiring substantial repair. The cost of those 1,000 houses to be rebuilt at \$200,000 per house, including basic infrastructure, amounts to an astronomical \$200 million; a further 500 houses to be rebuilt on Bequia and St. Vincent will add another \$100 million. And then there are monies required for the repair of others.

This is a matter on which the home-owners, financial institutions, and the government are to be engaged creatively for urgent solutions. It is critical for recovery and reconstruction.

EDUCATION FOR THE CHILDREN

The roofs of the primary and secondary schools in Canouan are badly damaged, but they can be repaired before the new term in September 2024, provided there is a return to some elemental normalcy (electricity, water, telecoms), and sufficient housing provisions; the schools are actually used as shelters. So, there may be a possibility of resuming primary and secondary education on Canouan, but this is very uncertain. Mayreau's primary school may be in a similar realm of possibility but yet uncertainty at this time.

However, it is well-nigh impossible for primary and secondary education to be restored on Union Island in time for September 2024. Accordingly, it is necessary for specific facilities to be made available on St. Vincent for this purpose. This will involve, too, accommodation for students, teachers, and members of their families. This will carry a huge cost to be funded by the government. We are already examining the options.

CLEAN-UP

The clean-up in the Southern Grenadines is a massive undertaking. The huge piles of dispersed rubble have to be gathered, centralised, separated, crushed, and un-useful remains removed to another location outside of these fragile islands. Preparatory work is being done by BRAGSA and relevant contracts have been awarded. Expert advice is being actively sought as to the best way of treating with this vital issue.

ACTIVISM ON OVERSEAS FRONT

In summary, the Prime Minister has been very active on the regional and global fronts. He has been receiving telephone calls from leaders globally, including António Guterres, Secretary General of the United

Nations, His Majesty King Charles, and Joseph Borrell (High Representative/Foreign Minister of the European Union). The Prime Minister has received communication from many other leaders and governments, including through Ambassadors/High Commissions, from UK, USA, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Taiwan, among others.

The Prime Minister has sent letters about the devastation wrought by Beryl to several Heads of State and Government, including Britain, USA, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, Japan, Russia, Taiwan, France, Romania, Chile, India, Turkey, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. In each of the letters (excluding the one to Taiwan) he canvassed support for Grenada also.

Further, the Minister of Finance and his staff, have been working with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on financing issues.

The Prime Minister hosted a breakfast meeting on Sunday July 6, 2024, with a six-member team from the Caribbean Development Bank, headed by its Acting President; the Prime Minister's team comprised the Minister of Finance, the Director General of Finance and Planning, and the Director of Planning, among others. There was a full discussion on financing for relief, recovery, and reconstruction.

Overseas, SVG's Ambassadors, High Commissions, Consul Generals, and other diplomats have been hard and smart at work on post-Beryl issues. This week at the United Nations a "Flash Appeal" is to be made on behalf of SVG, and Grenada.

MEANWHILE NEMO AT WORK

Meanwhile NEMO and its various constituent bodies are in a very activist mode, doing heroic work. NEMO's Management Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, is continuing its oversight role. On Saturday, July 6th, the Council met in full session and took critical decisions on the way forward.

Other vital state agencies including CWSA and VINLEC have been outstanding in their efforts.

Still, there is so much to be done now, and for the future.

SUMMATION

Despite all the magnificent endeavours of our government, NEMO, the various state agencies, the private sector, our diaspora, activist individuals, and supportive solidarity from regional and international governments and institutions, the relief, recovery, and reconstruction would not be optimal unless all of our people pull their weight in accord with their respective abilities and circumstances. Too many of our people are not yet in active solidarity mode. It is painful to see old women and men helping to clean up, and some strong men and women idly watching them. This must change!