

SCHOOL RE-OPENING BECKONS AMIDST CHALLENGES AFTER BERYL

BY

UNITY LABOUR PARTY

THE ISSUE

Hurricane Beryl which struck SVG on July 1, 2024, devastated the Southern Grenadines and severely damaged parts of Bequia, Young Island, and St. Vincent. Among the buildings severely damaged or destroyed were primary and secondary schools and the SVG Community College — 28 in all. Additionally, and especially, in Union Island hardly any house was spared the wrath of Hurricane Beryl, and modern requisites like electricity and telecommunications facilities were ravaged, to be rebuilt from scratch.

Further, across St. Vincent and the Grenadines today there are 20 schools which are currently housing 559 shelterees, 160 of whom are from Union Island; almost all of the others are from St. Vincent. These shelterees have to be accommodated elsewhere and the repair of the schools effected before they can be reopened for students.

The scheduled opening day for the next school term is September 2, 2024. It is unlikely that many schools will be ready on that day.

DESTROYED OR SEVERELY DAMAGED SCHOOLS

The destroyed or severely damaged schools are:

- (1) Mary Hutchinson Primary School on Union Island: This was completely destroyed; it is being rebuilt but will not be ready for a few more months. It has a population of around 90 students.
- (2) Stephanie Browne Primary School on Union Island: this was severely damaged; its repair may be completed by September 9, 2024. It houses some 150 students.
- (3) Union Island Secondary School: This was severely damaged. Its repair is being done and is likely to be ready for September 2, 2024. Its enrollment for the new term is 212 students.
- (4) Bishops College Kingstown: This was severely damaged. The contractor is at work on it but it is unlikely to be ready before mid-September 2024.
- (5) Calder Primary School: This was severely damaged. It is being repaired. Cross our fingers, it may be ready for September 2, 2024.

- (6) Canouan Primary School: Parts of the school (mainly the roof) severely damaged. It is being worked on. It is likely to be ready for the scheduled start of the school term but there are shelterees in it and neither alternative accommodation nor the houses of the shelterees may be available on time for the premises to be vacated.
- (7) Canouan Secondary School: The same situation as the Canouan Primary School.
- (8) Mayreau Primary School: Two small structures on the school compound have to be rebuilt and the school itself to be repaired. A contractor has commenced work on this project. However, the large family in the school has to be accommodated elsewhere; a contractor has been engaged to rebuild the home of that family. The requisites here suggest a late re-opening of this school.
- (9) Paget Farm Primary School (Bequia): This school was destroyed. Several local contractors are at work building a temporary school. It may meet the September 2nd reopening but it is touch-and-go in that regard.
- (10) Lower Bay Primary School (Bequia): This school was damaged. It has small numbers, under 50 students. It is being repaired. It should be ready for scheduled reopening.
- (11) St. Joseph's Convent Mesopotamia: Major repairs required. Work in progress.
- (12) Emmanuel High School (Mespo): Major repairs. Work in progress.
- (13) Adelphi Secondary School: Major repairs. Work in progress.
- (14) St. Joseph's Convent Kingstown: Major repairs. Work in progress.
- (15) Campden Park Technical Institute: Severely damaged. Repairs on stream.

TWENTY SCHOOLS WITH 559 SHELTEREES

The twenty schools housing 559 shelterees, including 160 from Union Island, and their status are as follows:

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| (1) | <u>Langley Park Government School</u> | : | 14 shelterees; minor repairs to be effected. |
| (2) | <u>Georgetown Secondary School</u> | : | 18 shelterees; minor repairs to be done. |
| (3) | <u>Park Hill Government School</u> | : | 6 shelterees; minor repairs to be effected. |
| (4) | <u>Diamond Government School</u> | : | 8 shelterees; minor repairs to be done. |
| (5) | <u>Argyle Government School</u> | : | 23 shelterees; minor repairs to be done. |
| (6) | <u>Brighton Methodist School</u> | : | 23 shelterees; <u>major repairs to be done.</u> |
| (7) | <u>Fair Hall Primary School</u> | : | 33 shelterees; minor repairs required. |
| (8) | <u>Calliaqua Anglican School</u> | : | 30 shelterees; minor repairs to be done. |

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| (9) | <u>Belmont Government School</u> | : | 14 shelterees; significant repairs to be done, including parts of the roof and the ceiling |
| (10) | <u>Sion Hill Government School</u> | : | 15 shelterees. Minor repairs required. |
| (11) | <u>Kingstown Government School (Stoney Ground)</u> | : | 77 shelterees. Significant repairs, especially due to wear and tear of the use as a shelter with large numbers of persons. |
| (12) | <u>J.P. Eustace Memorial (Edinboro)</u> | : | 79 shelterees. Same situation as Kingstown Government School |
| (13) | <u>Lowmans Leeward Anglican Primary:</u> | : | 31 shelterees. Minor repairs needed |
| (14) | <u>Bethel High School (Campden Park)</u> | : | 9 shelterees. Minor repairs required. |
| (15) | <u>Buccament Bay Secondary School</u> | : | 23 shelterees. Minor repairs plus wear and tear to be addressed. |
| (16) | <u>Petit Bordel Secondary School</u> | : | 13 shelterees. Minor repairs to be done. |
| (17) | <u>Troumaca Secondary School</u> | : | 8 shelterees. Minor repairs needed. |
| (18) | <u>Bequia Anglican School</u> | : | 52 shelterees. Minor repairs and excessive wear and tear to be addressed. |
| (19) | <u>Canouan Government School</u> | : | 50 shelterees. Major repairs nearing completion. |
| (20) | <u>Mayreau Government School</u> | : | One large family is sheltering. Substantial work to be done on the two small buildings in the compound. [This was addressed earlier]. |

The minor repairs are expected to take two weeks in each case. The major repairs at Brighton and Belmont will take longer. Those with excessive wear and tear will consume time to be repaired in addition to the pre-existing requisite of minor repairs.

A huge challenge here is to find alternative accommodation for the shelterees.

SOME SOLUTIONS ON ALTERNATIVE ACCOMMODATION

There are some solutions being effected for alternative accommodation of the 559 persons in the schools shelters:

- (i) Repairing the Levels 1 and 2 damage (lower level damage) to the houses of shelterees by the Ministry of Housing. This is happening in numerous cases.
- (ii) Seeking accommodation, at government's expense, in guest houses, apartments, and private houses-for-rent. The shelterees are being asked to seek out houses-for-rent wherever they can. Some progress is being made in this regard but there is an insufficiency of available rooms, apartments, or houses for rent.

- (iii) Consolidation of some shelterees in shelters which are not schools: Let us take the following three examples: (a) There are 27 shelterees in three facilities in Chateaubelair and Petit Bordel. They can be consolidated at the Richmond Vale Academy; (b) there are shelterees from the schools in Buccament and Campden Park who can be transferred to the Barrouallie Emergency Shelter; (c) the shelterees at the Lowmans Leeward Anglican School can be moved to the Questelles Learning Resource Centre and the Richmond Hill Community Centre. The big problem here is that the shelterees are strongly resisting any move, however, temporary from the occupied schools. Their reasons are varied.
- (iv) Exit Packages: It may be possible in some cases to provide exit packages (money for their own house repairs, income support, and production support). This option poses certain operational challenges, especially the provision of money directly to the shelterees for repair of their houses.

SPECIAL CASE OF UNION ISLAND

The government has decided to provide the option to parents from Union Island of having their children educated on Union Island or on St. Vincent temporarily. On St. Vincent a facility is being repurposed to this end; at the same time the government is repairing the secondary school and one primary school on Union Island as earlier detailed.

It appears from the preliminary data that most parents are opting to send their students to the facility on St. Vincent. There are some 450 primary and secondary students enrolled in the two primary, and the secondary school on Union Island.

The issues of accommodation for students, parents, and teachers on both Union Island and St. Vincent are critical. Please note that already there are some 2,000 Unionites on St. Vincent — 160 persons in shelters and over 600 families (about 1,800 persons) in private accommodation. The educational challenges raised by Beryl's disaster are not easy to resolve, but we must do our very best for our students and their parents.

REPAIRS OF ALL OTHER EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

Meanwhile, BRAGSA is currently actively engaged with contractors carrying out repairs and reconstruction on the educational facilities (schools, technical institutes, community college) which are not being used as shelters. It is a massive and very high-cost exercise. Most of these will be ready for re-opening of the new school term on September 2, 2024.

Simultaneously, school furniture and equipment (computers, etc.) are being sourced. Nearly \$4 million additionally is being allocated for this purpose beyond the numbers budgeted in the Estimates for 2024. Similarly, an additional \$2.5 million is to be spent on school uniforms and supplies through the Ministry of National Mobilisation for students from vulnerable families.

HOUSING: A CRITICAL NEED

Currently, the Ministry of Housing has engaged contractors to effect repairs on over 600 Beryl affected houses (Levels 1 and 2 damage). Next week more contractors who become available are to be engaged for this purpose. The Housing and Land Development Corporation (HLDC) is tasked with the tackling of Levels 3 and 4 damage to houses throughout SVG. They will commence their actual work next week.

Building materials have been sent to Bequia, Union Island, Canouan, Mayreau, and storage depots across St. Vincent to assist with the housing repair and reconstruction programme. In excess of 4,000 houses from Beryl's disaster and the outstanding remainder from the volcanic eruptions of 2021 are to be tackled. This is a massive undertaking that will take time and loads of money, all of which we do not as yet have; but we are searching with optimism for the money.

This housing issue is obviously tied to the reopening of school on time.

SUMMATION

As always let us act in unity and solidarity with strong faith, refreshed hope, and amazing love. All hands-on deck, please!

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