

The Aftermath of the Rupununi Uprising on the Amerindians in Guyana

Introduction.

I had previously promised in my letters on the Rupununi Uprising (KN and SN) to look at the impact of the quelling of the Rupununi uprising on the Indigenous Peoples (See ref *1 for some History of the Amerindians) of Guyana.

In that presentation, one of the most haunting questions is why the Govt. was so obsessed with extreme secrecy (exclusion of Priests (*2 - *5), foreigners, other Guyanese, media, etc) of the events for years with regards to the Amerindians in the Rupununi.

This was a Govt that did not care about public opinion in its suppression of the civil liberties of any opponent to its regime. Unless, of course the Govt.'s own conduct went beyond its own norms. The possibilities are: (1) Incident(s) so horrible was/were done so that even the complacent Caribbean Leaders, World Leaders (including leaders of then 77 Non-aligned Countries), and the International Community (including its US and British backers) would find this intrusion both abhorrent, and unacceptable. (2) The revelation of whatever was done would irreparably harm the already limited credibility of the Govt. in its drive for regional and international respectability.

That secret must have been so important that a lot of resources (Govt. and security personnel, finances) were devoted to safe-guarding this secret during the entire life of that Govt.. What were the details of these manoeuvres that urgently necessitated the forceful implementation of this extreme control of this closed area (Even closed to development)? The answer must be that the events culminated in some occurrences far greater and beyond comprehension than the usual beatings and human/civil rights violations.

I have tried to reconstruct the story from the information from the various cited sources.

Rupununi Uprising: Only a few Amerindians were involved, yet all were punished.

Mr LFS. Burnham in his radio broadcast (Jan 4th, 1969) to the nation (*5) had stated: “ The insurrection as we know was planned, organized and carried out by ranchers of the Rupununi... Such Amerindians citizens as were involved were employed in a secondary capacity and **appeared generally to have acted under duress and in response to orders of their rancher employers.**” The Army's version (*6) stated: “ A gang of bandits... had launched an uprising in the Rupununi district...The leading desperadoes (Hart and Melville Clans)...had armed a few of their retainers, **pressed them into service** and set about their wicked mission...” “Patrols (of the 2nd Battalion) scoured the vast savannahs and **re-established peace and tranquility...**”

The Govt (*5) and Army (*6) were therefore both fully aware of this fact that only a few Amerindians were involved; and that most of these were forced and/or threatened into service. It is therefore surprising that the children of these ex-slaves and ex-indentured servants would go in the interior enclaves of the Amerindians, and so ‘wreak havoc’ on the indigenous men, women, and children that these folks were forced to flee (once again) their own homes (and even their subsistence living). Some Amerindians were so terrified that they had to seek safe havens in neighbouring Brazil and Venezuela (*5, *7). Even Army documents (*6) mentioned: “ **refugees** came back to their homesteads...” We must therefore wonder why/how were the refugees created? Seems that the Prime Minister answered this question when he said: “ ... centres of terrorist activities (homes) at Pirara, Good Hope, and Sunnyside have been razed to the ground by our forces (*5).” This statement is surprising because he had said earlier that the rebels had fled. Who was the

army fighting? What was it doing? Seems that there was an apparent hunting down and killing of Amerindians from community to community.

This would indeed be something to hide; if that were true then there was the deliberate, systematic killing of a particular cultural, or racial group (commonly defined as **genocide**). This would explain what happened (Confinement, occupation, purging, exclusion of outsiders, secrecy, etc).

Mr Ranji Chandisingh had alluded to the Govt.'s secret, when he (* 5) said: "...the Government had **something to hide**; it was not telling the truth about the situation in the Rupununi – particularly with respect to the Amerindians. There was much speculation as to the **number of deaths**." A UNDP's Human Development Report 2004 (*8) by Ms. Joy Moncrieffe (page 46 and Table 5) quoted a document on the 1969 Rupununi uprising, that stated the outcome was: "**military suppression; hundreds killed/migrated**." That was called restoring "peace and tranquility" by the army (*6). Apparently, any killed Amerindian was now labelled a 'rebel'.

Assuming that at least 100 killed (*5, *9), then we must ask: who were killed, and how were they killed? Were the men killed: shot running out of their homes (burning), and/or fleeing from the scenes of horrors? Or were those who give themselves up also shot and/or beaten to death? How many died later from their beatings? Were children in their arms when they were shot? How many women and children were shot or killed in the pandemonium?

Why? One may conjecture that some sort of conscious/subconscious racism was most likely involved here, that the army would teach these "inferior people" a lesson. (The bully's syndrome, locally called removing any 'eye-pass' syndrome.) The soldiers probably knew that there would be no accountability or consequences; besides their actions were probably officially sanctioned. This is best answered by those involved. (The army career officers were subsequently rewarded with high salaries, duty-free cars, housing, and other privileges for their service and loyalty) What we do know is that the formerly oppressed (children of ex-slaves and ex-indentured servants) have now become the oppressor with a vengeance on the even more oppressed (People of the **fourth world**, now being labelled: "disloyal and subversive elements").

The Aftermath of the Uprising. Terror. Pacification

It would seem that the Army (Purged of potentially disloyal elements and/or those who cannot be trusted, was now anxious to prove its worth and loyalty to the PNC Govt., and also to take revenge for the murdered police officers.) showed no mercy, presented not only "shock and terror": but also "scorched earth" policies. The reports suggest that the personnel of the army involved behaved (or the officers condoned such behaviour) like some renegade invading armies of a bygone era (The vivid portrayal of the Pan-Tribal report (*4) showed that the suppression war was: a war in its most primal form – burn the houses (53), beat (326) and kill the men (70-100), rape the women and girls (81), beat the children, and feast on the spoils of war (500 cattle)! (The numbers in brackets are conservative estimates)) These actions of the army would explain the why the Amerindian people hid and fled (those who could), and why refugees were created (*7, *9.)

The Amerindian villages were also under siege for a long time. Armed men who had previously entered into their communities, shooting, burning, beating, and killing them were now living in their midst. The personal safety of the Amerindians was now severely

threatened. What do unarmed civilians do? Since there was no shelter, no food, no outside help, no arms, no hope, there was no resistance. Survivors can only hide and run. That was in effect state-sponsored terrorism being inflicted by the Govt. on its own civilians (eerily reminiscent of Saddam's vengeance on the Kurds). The actions of the army must have invoked the long suppressed memories of their brutalized past and the visitations of past unholy terrors! (This was reminiscent of the arrival of the early Europeans.)

Human Rights violations: Illegal detentions – “Ethnic Confinement.”

The arbitrary arrests, detentions, and restrictions of the movement of persons within the country were illegal, so the laws had to change to legalize their already committed illegal and unconstitutional acts. The PNC Govt. (Mr LFS Burnham as Minister of Defence, and Mr S. Ramphal as Attorney general and Minister of Foreign Affairs) therefore rushed through the Parliament (Feb. 1969), “The National Security Act” to restrict the movement of persons within Guyana and to prevent Guyanese from leaving the country. The Government imposed a complete ban on persons entering the (Rupununi) area (“The Erosion of Civil Liberties” by Mr Ranji Chandisingh (PPP member who defected to the PNC) in the October-December 1969 issue of Thunder (*5)).

The villages were virtually under siege (‘ethnic confinement’) by the army, since people were not allowed to leave their confines to pursue their livelihoods and their customary activities. In addition, they were isolated since they were not allowed any contact with outsiders - Priests (Catholics and Anglicans), religious and social workers, legal and elected representatives, local and international presses. (Only Govt, security personnel and top PNC officials were allowed into their enclaves). Even their traditional Guardians (e.g. Missionaries, priests (Jesuits (*2) and others) were expelled from the areas and never allowed to return (*5). (Hence they could not even find spiritual comfort in their religion.) Now they were really all alone. They were at the mercy of their new well-armed and brutal oppressors. Their homes/communities became in effect concentration camps. This isolation resulted in further marginalization of an already marginalized people. (The US Library of Congress document (*3) states: “it (the rebellion) exposed underlying tensions in the new state and the Amerindians’ marginalized role in the country’s political and social life.”) This isolation was to continue until 1992, a 1998 report stated: “The PNC for a variety of historical reasons (e.g. the 1969 Rupununi Uprising) was nervous about projects which would bring foreign researchers into contact with the Amerindian population... (*10).”

Human Rights Violations: Mistreatment and Sexual Abuse

Dr Andrew Saunders had stated in a quoted document (*9): “The general behaviour of the Guyana Defence Force has further increased bitterness and resentment among the Amerindian populations. Mr Christopher Carrico stated (*11): “...It was the Amerindians who paid the greatest price. Subsequently, under Mr Forbes Burnham’s PNC government, the Amerindian rights movement was suppressed. Amerindian villages were required to take ‘loyalty oaths,’ and military presence was increased along the border with complaints by Amerindians of abuse by soldiers.” (See also * 5 for details of the oaths). Rape (81 recorded) was used as an effective weapon of suppression of the people. The Amerindian men could do nothing, but watch as their wives, daughters, relatives, and friends were being raped. These actions clearly send the message of who was in charge; and in addition psychologically castrated the men. There is nothing more demoralizing to the manhood of men of any group (especially the marginalized) not to be able to protect their women folk from the sexual molestations of their oppressors.

Amerindian women continued to be sexual fodder/outlets for the army during the occupation. The women could be taken at will, anytime, and anywhere with impunity. Even years later, Amerindian leaders who were courageous enough to speak out when they reported the rapes by the GDF soldiers were usually told by the senior ranking officer: “Well when you bring boys from the coast into these areas they get urges and unfortunately these things happen.” No charges and or disciplinary actions were ever brought against any of the reported rapists.

This legacy of abuse has continued and become so entrenched that the Amerindian People Association (APA) had complained in 1997 in a report (*12): “There is a systemic pattern of abuse of Amerindians, particularly of Amerindian women by police and soldiers stationed in interior communities. Police in the Orealla Amerindian reservation were arresting Amerindian women on false charges and sexually assaulting them in the jail.” If security personnel can do this in peaceful times with impunity (no charges and/or investigations were ever carried out), what do you think would have happened in “war times”? Human rights group had made similar reports in 1994.

Human rights violations: Food, health, medical, and education concerns.

Since their livelihoods have been restricted/removed, and their own cattle seized by the army, they suffered economic hardships (There was a massive decline of the cattle industry following the Rupununi Uprising. Some employers had fled.), and starvation followed. Mothers were now being forced (their men killed, injured, disabled, imprisoned, or forced to flee) to beg for food from their punishers or occupiers of their communities. It is not difficult to imagine (under these circumstances) the currency that would be used in exchange for food. No mother should ever be subjected to this human degradation.

The men and boys who were beaten (326, some into unconsciousness) were never given any medical treatment, nor were they allowed any access to the even limited facilities that existed. (Over 325 were beaten, 147 were arrested, yet only about 30 were tried in G/Town. Why? The authorities did not want severely injured people on public trial. Hence only the able-bodied were tried). Medical personnel were not allowed in the area; nor were seriously injured persons taken to the city for medical treatment. The rape victims (including under-aged girls) did not receive any medical attention. The people were not allowed to mourn the dead in their own time and way (No foreign Priests or religious workers). What the army did with the bodies in their sanitization project is subject to speculation. (Maybe the army can tell us what happened with the desecrated bodies. No autopsy was ever done on these bodies. (Officially there was no dead.)) There was no treatment /counselling offered these trauma victims (including children). The children (boys) who were beaten and charged were separated from their families, thus family units were destabilized.

Even their limited education/schooling was disrupted. The teachers (Jesuits from the Church schools) were also removed from the areas, hence the standard of their education declined even further. Replacements, if any, were with unqualified PNC Party faithful. These were more concerned with party indoctrination. Those upheavals of the social order caused the disruption of family structures. (Some escaped, some would become refugees.)

Human rights violations: Coercion

Under the guise of Amerindian development, the Prime Minister of Guyana (and also Minister of Defence, and Minister of Amerindian Affairs) Mr. LFS Burnham brought all the Amerindian Toucaus (Chiefs) to Georgetown for a 4-day (28th Feb to 3rd March, 1969)

conference (*5). The Amerindians had to pledge allegiance to the Govt of Guyana (The same Govt that was currently abusing them!). Interestingly, during their carefully orchestrated stay in G/town they were not allowed contact with non-Govt and/or non-PNC personnel. No contact was allowed with the PPP, or their members of Parliament, or the independent media.

It is inconceivable that the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Minister of Amerindian Affairs would have not been aware of what was happening, in light of the fact that so much deliberate cover-up actions were taken.

Human rights violations: Legacy. Belated Remedial Actions.

The legacy of this contempt and mistreatment was not only confined to the Rupununi area, but became the general norm in which Amerindians were being treated throughout present-day independent Guyana (*12). Even today, a majority of Amerindians (in the predominantly Amerindian area) have nothing, but loathing and disgust in their hearts for the (non-Amerindian) GDF and Police personnel (*4, Pan Tribal sources).

There must be a very deep undercurrent of pain and anguish (over 20 years) that led to these traumatized folks telling their stories to their fellow indigenous Amerindian brethren to trigger a request for an investigation into the Rupununi Affair. The Pan Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Nations then commissioned a report into the allegations. The Study was performed (Mr Francisco Luna de Bomparte, Investigative Journalist) during the period 1993-1999. This 6-year study (included interviews with Amerindians who fled to Brazil and Venezuela) conformed that atrocities did take place (*4).

It is about 35 years and still these Guyanese voices and anguish have not been heard and acknowledged by their fellow Guyanese (Non-Indigenous) in their own country! They must therefore continue to be amongst the most discriminated and marginalized of all the various groups in the country. The questions we have to ask ourselves are: Would any other group be denied even the courtesy of a public hearing? Is their pain less human? Are these the perceived children of a lesser God? Where is the outrage of the other cultural and religious groups? It has therefore become necessary for the Rupununi incident to be investigated and the truth told to the public and the world.

The people involved or most affected by this traumatic event would have to be consulted. These should include: (1) the Amerindian Nations, especially the Makushi and Wapishana Nations; (2) the families of those who were brutalized and or killed; (3) the victims (including women and children); and (4) the refugees who fled. A lot of these traumatized survivors are still alive; the burdens that they quietly carry are unimaginable. Those who were forced to flee their homeland should be allowed to return as other Guyanese are now doing. (It is now widely recognized that victims of any traumatic events suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSDs). Some help must be offered).

Ironically, as we have seen in South Africa, the torturers confessed and sought the forgiveness of the tortured. Dr. Franz Fanon (Author of: *The Wretched of the Earth*) also treated the torturers in Algeria. These confessions may also be good for the perpetrators.

Only those who suffer can forgive, it would be impossible to forget what has been so deeply burned in their psyches. Maybe the survivors can find some measure of peace in this land of theirs. These long overdue voices must be heard, before any reconciliation or healing processes can begin.

I have by no means exhausted all aspects of the miseries inflicted on the Amerindians, you may well say that it does not concern you; but it does. The same hammer of oppression would fall with equal severity in the same pattern, and as before only a few protested as

we spiral into a long nightmarish blackhole into purgatory. All of Guyana would be consumed and likewise destroyed. The question is: Will we ever learn that there is no “them and us” - for we are they and they are we. When we learn this simple truth we can emerge as a better people/country.

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Yours sincerely,
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