

Human Rights Violations By The Security Forces In Guyana During the Burnham/PNC years

During my graduate studies (at a reception for graduate students, late 70's, Vancouver), I proudly introduced myself as hailing from the Beautiful Republic of Guyana, land of the Mighty Kaieteur Falls, etc, etc. One woman came up to my group and said that was interesting, and that she was a member of Amnesty International (AI) and that her group had recently welcome someone from Guyana to Toronto. The person said that she has seen concentration camp victims, and this case was reminiscent of what she has seen of concentration camp survivors of Auschwitz. I replied that from my knowledge, she had it wrong; in Guyana, political opponents were shot or beaten, but never starved to near death. Withholding of food and water from political opponents was not practiced. I said that I am sure that she was confusing Guyana with some African country.

The woman replied that she was not confused; the victim of Indian descent came from the Mazaruni Prison, Essequibo. That floored me completely. I was shocked, and realized that she was telling the truth. She saw the expression on my face and said that she was sorry to have ruined my evening; and that she thought that I knew what was going on in my country. One of my regrets was that I never got the name of that particular victim.

Let us see what The US library of Congress (Google - Library of Congress, Search – Guyana) Jan, 1992 document has to say about the Violation of Human Rights In Guyana:

“**Arbitrary detention** of civilians, **physical abuse of prisoners**, and **summary executions** became standard police behavior during **Linden Forbes Burnham's** regime (1964-85). During the period, the government routinely refused to conduct public inquiries into killings, even into those in which it was not implicated. In 1973 a University of Guyana lecturer (**Dr Joshua Ramsammy**) was severely wounded in what many people believed to be an attempted assassination. In 1976 noted PPP member **Isahak Basir** was severely wounded by police. In 1979 political activist **Ohena Koama** was shot and killed in Georgetown by police. In October 1979, government minister **Vincent Teekah** was murdered. In all these cases, no inquest was held. The most infamous murder was the 1980 killing of internationally respected historian and political activist **Walter Rodney**. The United States Department of State believed the government was implicated in the murder, which occurred when a small radio transmitter in Rodney's possession exploded.”

“The Guyana Human Rights Association determined that from January 1980 to June 1981, at least **twenty-two people** were killed by police with no inquests ever held. The police stated that all the victims either had attacked police officers or were killed trying to escape.”

“Another common government practice was to deny opposition groups permission to demonstrate peaceably. On September 17, 1981, the **Working People's Alliance**

organized a demonstration without government permission. The crowd of fewer than 100 called for higher wages, affirmed Guyana's territorial integrity, and criticized South Africa's apartheid regime. Police intervened in the protest, arrested political leaders **Moses Bhagwan** and **Eusi Kwayana**, and beat those demonstrators who would not disperse.”

“In preparation for the 1985 elections, the PNC regime reenacted Part II of the National Security Act. This act gave the security forces wide-ranging powers of detention, including the authority to prevent people "from acting in a manner likely to cause subversion of democratic institutions in Guyana." The latitude authorized by the National Security Act intimidated the opposition parties. Reenactment of Part II was quickly followed by army chief of staff **McLean's** announcement that the army would secure and escort ballot boxes during the election. The PNC's victory was announced on December 12, three days after the election. In response, several civic groups, including the Guyana Bar Association and the Guyana Council of Churches, released a joint communique condemning, among other things, "**violence and collusion by police and army personnel.**"

I shall leave out **the informal Paramilitary Groups: House of Israel and the organized gangs** in this presentation (length considerations).

From the above document, we can see that there was gross violation of human rights being visited upon political opponents and civilians on the coast, where these events were easily documented and known to the public. The Govt. had no concerns about the morality or illegality of their actions. The abuse of political prisoners was therefore true. In effect, the whole country became a huge concentration camp, with camps (ethnic confinements e.g. the Amerindians) within the one bigger camp. The security forces (Police [including prison wardens] and Army), and the House of Israel thugs were the agents who executed the orders from the Burnham/PNC regime.

As bad as these violations were for the general population (coastlanders), these were nothing compared to the violations visited upon the more vulnerable and isolated Amerindians. If the Govt had no qualms abusing people (during legitimate protests) on the coast in full view of public and diplomatic community, what do you think it would do to those who committed/attempted treason or those associated/aligned with such treasonous persons?

What is also striking (from the document) was that the leadership of the opponents (UG Faculty, the Churches, and WPA) was the ones who bore the brunt of the wrath of the Burnham regime. These organizations (UG, Churches, and WPA) had the people and intellectual resources to be effective opponents of the Burnham/PNC regime. (The effectiveness of the PPP was now in decline). The names that are mentioned/indicated by the American document are: Dr Joshua Ramsammy, Mr. Moses Bhagwan, Mr Eusi Kwayana, Dr Walter Rodney, and Father Andrew Morrison.

The names of high-ranking PPP officials are noticeably absent for “special treatment” or punishment “as enemies of the state.” This observation leads one to assume that the PPP brass was therefore of no serious threat to the Burnham regime.

Therefore, later it was mainly the WPA, Churches, and many others who were carrying on the genuine struggle for the liberation of the Guyanese People from the tyranny of the Burnham/PNC regime. This fact is important since the PPP (under Dr C.Jagan) in 1992, apparently denied the WPA any participation in the reconstructive efforts of the country. The PPP had denied the efforts of years of blood, sweat, and tears of others. It lost the moral high ground and the trust of many people, when it committed this colossal blunder. We are living with the consequences of this most tragic and lost opportunity.

The PPP’s officials often repeated mantra to numerous well-meaning overseas Guyanese trying to advise the Govt. is: “ Where were you, when we were fighting the PNC?” Now we know that the PPP’s claim is false. Their mistaken beliefs/propaganda that they (the PPP) were the only ones in the forefront of the anti-Burnham forces are just a wishful fantasy and/or delusion.

Incidentally, from the above we can easily see who should be our national heroes. Names (among others) that should be honoured in our struggle against tyranny must include: Dr Joshua Ramsammy, Mr Moses Bhagwan, Mr Eusi Kwayana, Father Andrew Morrison, and Dr Walter Rodney. It is about time that we catalogue and honour all the people who stood up and paid dearly for that courage during that darkest period of severest human rights violations in the our modern history.

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