

## Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> Is Amerindian Remembrance Day – A Day of National Mourning

Sunday, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1968, Mr W.M. Ridgewell, an Englishman, had a front seat at Guyana's second anniversary Independence Day celebrations. He and his wife were official guests of the Burnham/PNC government. His book jacket states: "W.M. Ridgewell constantly visited and for a long time lived among the Amerindians in their tiny, remote villages. Some were on riverbanks, some in jungle forests clearings, others in vast savannah regions." Mr Ridgewell "chronicles the adventures and experiences in Guyana – in particular among the peaceful, primitive, and likable Amerindians" in his book: '**The Forgotten Tribes of Guyana**' (by W.M. Ridgewell). The book (ISBN 0 85468 184 1) was first Published in 1972 by Tom Stacey Ltd (28-29 Maiden Lane, London, England WC2E 7JP). It just came to my attention as I extended the boundaries of the research.

I shall quote and thereby let Mr Ridgewell tell his story about the Rupununi Uprising:

"Amerindians, traditionally, are quiet and peaceable people. They do not rebel without cause, and then only if misled. The rebellion of January 2<sup>nd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup>, possibly in collusion with an unfriendly foreign power, was an insensate and culpable act instigated by ranchers who should have known better. Certainly the uprisings were rooted in injustices and longstanding grievances.... Nevertheless, it was irresponsible and reckless..."

"The new (PNC) Govt., and the new year of 1969, got off to a bad start. The cumulative effect of non-consideration for the Amerindians, and the failure to implement their land rights, was bitter and tragic. On Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> some of the Rupununi ranchers staged a revolt with the suggested connivance of Venezuela. The once peaceful Rupununi was turned into a battlefield, and the future of the Ranchers and of their dependent Amerindians was thrown into the melting pot. ...The revolt was an act of criminal folly, bringing frightful consequences in its train."

"The Guyana Defence Force had been flown out to quell the rebellion, five Negro policemen and a civilian had been killed, and government officials had been incarcerated in the local abattoir, and under armed guard, there held captive."

"The Guyana Defence Force, with machine guns, bazookas and flame throwers laid waste the ranchers' farmsteads, and some light aircraft and, after a bitter struggle in which there were many civilian casualties (undisclosed), gained the upper hand and established an uneasy calm."

"The ring-leaders of the rebellion fled into exile - to Brazil and to Venezuela. Amerindians immediately involved with them, together with hundreds who were not, suffered in consequence, and the cause of the Amerindians had a grievous setback. Fear of retribution stalks the Amerindian areas; and great numbers of innocents in the north Rupununi fled from their homes, terrified, and bewildered and lost. Many – and nobody knows just how many - died. It has been reported that Amerindians are buried in mass graves and that bodies were seen floating down the rivers. Carrion crows - in unusual number, and out of their normal season – hovered over deserted, stricken savannahs, preying on dead cattle lying amid burnt-out devastation."

"Allegations of atrocities against civilians by Negro police were made by a Brazilian paper *O Globo* and Featured in the London *Observer* on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1969:

“ In Lethem (according to the Brazilian reporter, from the Town of Boa Vista, across the frontier from Lethem) I saw houses destroyed by machine-gun fire without the occupiers having the slightest chance of escape. I saw Guyanese police cut down eight people, three adults and five children of seven and under. Another time they captured two girls, one of 14 and the other of 15. The two of them stayed tied up naked for three days without anything to eat. Afterwards they were raped by the police and immediately thrown on the ground and crushed by a lorry. I saw police surround houses full of people in the middle of the night, throw petrol on the walls and set light to it, starting on the doors and windows, and the occupants inside screamed till they died.”

“ I saw Indians (Amerindians) swimming across the River Mau at the frontier with their children on their backs, and many corpses of fugitives blown up and floating along with marks of gunshots.”

“ The writer “alleges that these incidents were part of the repression by the forces of Mr. Burnham’s Negro-based Government.” It went on to mention “ a cloak of silence which has impeded journalists from getting first-hand evidence from the Rupununi.””

“Ten Months after the uprisings, international observers were allowed on the scene; and some, to my knowledge were accorded government facilities and a District Commissioner to accompany them. One British observer, spent 48 hours in the Rupununi stated that: There is no evidence of massacre, burning of buildings and of villages, torture and brutality.”

“This statement was not accepted by a Guyanese familiar (my contact) with the Rupununi, who felt the observer had seen only what the authorities had wished him to see. Amerindians by nature are reticent. They are not readily forthcoming with strangers, especially if confronted at the same time with someone “in authority’. Their timidity and reticence would be tinged with fear, following the bloody events of the Rupununi Uprising.”

“The Guyanese informant (name withheld to protect from police recriminations) stated that the British observer “ was taken around to certain villages by the District Commissioner and not allowed to move around freely... I am returned home...being back here is not all that pleasant as we live under tension with the atmosphere alive with disquiet and corruption.”  
“ At times I have tried to get to the Villages and speak to the people in an effort to find out what happened to them during the uprising. They are all frightened and avoid speaking about their experience. This is to be expected as they have been told not to discuss anything about the “troubles” with any one that is not a member of the FORCE or the POLICE or certain members of the public who are members of the SS [Secret Service]...”

“They (the Burnham/PNC government) seem to forget or ignore the fact that an Amerindian has a good memory and the ash mounds that once were Pirara, Sante Fe, Musu, Mandakiru, Waruma, Mureru, Jewaree, Tabatinga and Meritezerio, was no joke.”

Mr Ridgewell then stated: “So much for their being ‘no evidence of ...burning of buildings and of the villages.”

“Maintenance of law and order is the first responsibility of any government. But whether it was necessary to mow down its own citizens with machine-guns, and to lay waste

farmsteads and village dwellings with flame-throwers, is a question only the government can answer.”

The above descriptions (English, Brazilian, and local Guyanese) given by the credible and knowledgeable writer Mr W.M Ridgewell match very well with those given by: the ex-soldier (to S.B.), Dr C. Jagan and the PPP, the Spanish source, the Pan Tribal investigation, and several others (See Letters to KN, SN, and [www.pantribalconfederacy.com](http://www.pantribalconfederacy.com) )

It is too much of a coincidence that all these diverse sources to be saying exactly the same things about the same “troubling incident”. Yet the security forces (police and GDF) and ex-Burnham/PNC Govt officials have denied any knowledge of any atrocities committed against the Amerindians in the name of the Guyanese people.

The book Jacket stated: “Mr Ridgewell promised the Amerindians that he would bring their plight to the notice of the outside world in an attempt to secure help, understanding, and justice for them. *“The Forgotten Tribes of Guyana”* has been written as a step in honouring that undertaking. The proceeds from its sales will be devoted to assisting the Amerindians.” He must have been very convinced of the injustices wrought.

Many Guyanese having seen the human rights violations with impunity against the citizenry (Coastal belt), and know that they cannot believe the security forces (Police and GDF) and the Burnham/PNC Govt.’s version of events against the Amerindians.

Today, **Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> is Amerindian Remembrance Day - A Day of National Mourning**, when we must solemnly bow our heads to remember the victims (living and dead) of this most tragic Day, 28 years ago. We must do this to show that we have some sense of human decency left in us, the Guyanese people. We have to start the healing process.

Seelochan Beharry PhD