

## **An Official UN Investigation can settle the Controversy of the Allegations of Atrocities committed during and after the Quelling of the Rupununi Uprising.**

### **Introduction**

War places men (and women) under extreme duress and abnormal conditions that can make ordinarily decent men heroes or scoundrels. In the last century, despite the fact that modern and highly 'civilized' nations were signatories to the Rules of War - Geneva Convention, there has not been a war in which atrocities were not committed. Even in the present century there are wars in which violations of these Geneva Conventions have occurred, and in some cases atrocities are still being committed.

In WW1, German soldiers wreaked havoc on the conquered countries. In WW11, the scale of horror (gas chambers, concentration camps, genocide - Jews, Gypsies, etc) was so magnified that it defies imaginations- that even today some continue to doubt that it ever happened. Despite all the evidences, no German military/political personnel at the Nuremberg trials pleaded guilty, nor accepted responsibility. Japan committed wholesale slaughter of thousands of Chinese citizens in the "Rape of Nanking." No one was brought to trial. Japan (like Germany) used its conquered people (Mostly Chinese and prisoners of war) for cruel biological experimentations in germ warfare. The Chinese survivors are still protesting their mistreatment. Unfortunately, Japan is yet to acknowledge its errors and to apologise to these survivors. The Japanese school texts are sanitized and no mention is made of their militarism and misdeeds! The resiliency of the Chinese voices and their Japanese supporters will prevail in time.

The Vietnam War and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia (Serbia –Bosnia) conflicts had their own distasteful episodes; younger readers are more familiar with these recent occurrences. In the present war in Iraq, we have the involvement of some of the most well-trained and disciplined armies (US and British forces with long military traditions) in the war. Yet during their tenure here, we have the inhumane treatment of prisoners at now the infamous Abu Ghraib prison right under the noses of so many. It occurred during the tenure of respected personnel such as the military governor - Mr Paul Bremer, secretary of state-Mr Colin Powell, secretary of defence – Mr Donald Rumsfeld, and President of the USA - Mr George Bush. Mr D. Rumsfeld has visited Iraq several times. So what happened that despite all these checks and balances, embedded journalists, etc. this mistreatment occurred? Seems that there cannot be enough safeguards during conflicts. (In the Guyana situation no such safeguards (No Press, No Opposition).were in place.

Hence the arguments of Mr J Singh (SN, 18<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2005) that:(1) Sandhurst-trained military officers were present; (2) the Army Chief of Staff - Colonel Roland Pope, Governor General- Sir David Rose, and Minister of Govt.- Mr P. Reid visited; and (3) Officers categorically denying any knowledge of such improprieties, are not necessarily valid ones. (Both Col R. Pope and Sir David Rose lacked the moral courage to oppose/protest the wrongful treatment meted out to the respected Major Raymond Sataur (heir apparent to Col Pope) and other officers of Indian descent!) I can cite numerous examples (of commonwealth countries India-Pakistan, Pakistan-Bangladesh, Nigeria-Ibo, Uganda (Idi Amin), Britain- Irish/IRA etc), where British/Sandhurst-trained officers were in charge and yet atrocities occurred.

### **The Guyana Situation then**

It seems strange that Mr Joe Singh (Mr R. Pope, Mr C. Price, and likewise all other officers) was not aware of these allegations of misconduct during his two months stay in the Rupununi, when these allegations were mentioned by Dr. C. Jagan soon after the Uprising. (Dr Jagan was denied entry to the area. Amerindians. Mr. Eugene Stobie, and Mr. Basil James were also denied access to the people of the area (\*1). In addition, the issue was raised in parliament by the opposition when the Govt. passed the National Security Act in early Feb 1969. One must then ask: When did Mr Joe Singh (and other officers) become aware of these allegations? Did Mr J Singh (and anyone else) conduct any investigation or raise the question with his superiors? If not, why?

We must remember Mr J. Singh was a Junior Officer at this time and a lot of officers/soldiers who were not perceived to be trustworthy/loyal/obedient (despite talent, competence professionalism, etc) were dismissed by Mr LFS Burnham. We therefore cannot reasonably expect him and others to destroy their army careers by questioning anything uncommon. That would have been the 'kiss of death' to any career ambitions. There is also the military/paramilitary code (and of many other professions) of not 'ratting' on your 'brother in arms'. Things must be judged very carefully within the context of the times. (However, we must note that young Mr J. Singh moved up very rapidly within the military structure. Why?)

However, the Govt. did hear of these allegations since Officials shrewdly sent the Roman Catholic Bishop of Georgetown, Rev R.L. Guilly to the South Rupununi (The rebellion took place in the North) who saw a burnt school (very unlikely to be home to ranchers and/or used for storage of arms) and nervous Amerindians (a number fled to Brazil). Who knows if his denial was misquoted – the Press freedom that we have today in Guyana was absent then.

### **The Guyana Situation now.**

In the Guyana situation now, we have very credible former army (Mr J. Singh [SN-18<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2205], Mr D. Roberts [ SN -14<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2005],and Mr R. Dipoo [KN-5<sup>th</sup> Aug.,2005] and Govt. personnel saying categorically that nothing unusual happened. We have to believe them and must give them the benefit of the doubt, until proven otherwise. But by the same token we have to also believe the stories of the victims (who are less articulate and do not have access to the media, who are still afraid of repercussions/reprisals, and who do not control the levers of power.) or people who know victims and/or seek the truth (S. Ashby- [SN-July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005], Mr. D. Corrie- [SN-Sept 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005], Mr. G. Marco - [SN-Sept 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005], and S. Samaroo- [ SN-Sept,11<sup>th</sup>,2005]. In addition, we have the sources mentioned in the letters of S. Beharry [(SN and KN - July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005), (KN- Aug 26<sup>th</sup>, 2005), and an abbreviated version SN- Aug 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005)]. Now we have a situation whereby both cannot be right at the same time. So what really happened? We have to find the bridge between two versions. (Incidentally, I applaud President B. Jagdeo's statement that any abuse of Guyana's Indigenous Peoples will not be tolerated)

### **Reasons for the conflict:**

Dr. C Jagan gave the reasons for the uprising a long time ago. "The revolt had its origin in a combination of factors – (1) resentment by the people of the Rupununi against the PNC Government for the electoral fraud and eviction of the United Force from the coalition; (2) dissatisfaction with the Government's high-handed action in connection with their leased lands; and (3) subversion by Venezuela in its quest for a Guyanese "fifth column" (July-September 1969 issue of Thunder, \*1). These factors are supported by writings of others (e.g.\*2). Mr David A Granger- A PNC/Burnham loyalist, and Rtd GDF Officer (Civil Violence, Domestic Terrorism

And Internal Security in Guyana, 1953-2003) wrote: “To some extent, the rebellion could be regarded as a violent response to the outcome of general elections in 1968” (\*2).”... “ The PNC electoral victory alarmed cattle ranchers in the Rupununi District, many of whom feared that without the UF party in Office to protect their interests, they would lose their leases to large areas of land. They were therefore determined to oppose the PNC administration and were assisted by Venezuela, which provided military training, equipment and transport (\*2).”

However, these ( Jagan and Granger) are not in agreement with the statement of Mr Joe Singh (SN, 18<sup>th</sup> Sept, 2005) that the fear of Nationalization of their Ranches motivated the ranchers.

Nationalization was not a big factor in the history of the Nation at that particular time. If Nationalization were the game plan, the Govt would now have had a very good reason to seize the Rancher’s assets without any compensation. In addition, it would not make sense to give orders to burn down the homes/offices of the Ranchers, if you are going to nationalize these properties/industries. This would also be unprecedented (destroying economic assets that you desire) in the history of any Nationalization process. In any case, these lands were under the control of the Crown; and the Govt could now control who gets the lease. The Govt could have proposed an even more severe reduction in the amounts of land to be leased. It is hard to conceive that Mr LFS Burnham would want his first historic act of Nationalization to be some cattle (No Optics, Not Sexy). (Even D.r C Jagan was not after this industry) This cattle industry was not a big factor in the Guyanese economy (Bauxite and Sugar were).

The elections were held on 16<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1968. “On 23<sup>rd</sup> Dec, 1968, one week after the elections, the major ranchers decided to declare the secession of Rupununi from Guyana...Several of them travelled to Venezuela to be trained and equipped, and returned on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1969.. (\*2).” The time line of the rapid pace of events does not allow time for a propaganda film to be thrown into the cauldron of events. In one week, besides getting military training, the ranchers also had to find a film (unusual [non-existent?] and rare. Couriered from the much-maligned New Guinea and /or Borneo?) to depict cannibalism, get it to the interior of the country (taking it around the entire Rupununi ) to be used to coerce the Amerindians in joining the rebellion! Mr Joe Singh had mentioned this fear of cannibalism to explain the distrust between the Amerindians and the GDF. If the Ranchers had been doing this before the planned uprising, surely the Govt officials/Priests/Church officials/etc. would have knowledge and put an end to that absurd rumour. Besides, the capturing of these films would have been a tremendous propaganda tool for the Govt.. It is curious that no mention was ever made of these films by the Prime Minister, Govt Ministers, Opposition, the Press, Mr Granger, or anyone else.

The cannibalism argument for tensions between the Amerindians and the Army (Security Forces cited by Mr J. Singh is not valid as will be evidenced below by the US Library of Congress documents (1992).

Besides at that point in our history, Guyanese (of African heritage) were amongst the most (if not the most) respected literate, sophisticated (culturally, manners, etiquette), and scholarly in the Country. The teachers, lawyers, trade unionists, ministers of religion, writers, poets, artists, musicians, doctors, scientists, mathematicians, professors, etc., were mostly people of African descent. In addition, because of their high levels of education and academic qualifications they dominated the civil service. It was the golden age of achievement (never seen since) of this sector

of the Guyanese population. I cannot see how this ‘cannibalism argument’ can be a sell to anybody in Guyana.

### **Discrepancies in the Accounts:**

First we were told that no burnings ( Dipoo, and Roberts) took place; then later we are told that the homes of the ranchers (Singh, Alfred Ramsarran (SN-Sept 22nd, 2005) and Gokarran Sukhdeo (SN-Sept 9th, 2005)] who fled were burnt. Mr Ramsarran said that those buildings that were burned were believed to have ammunition and guns stored inside. Rather unusual, any sensible army would seize these as evidence to be used in the trial of anyone about to be charged with treason. Secondly, the cattle left behind were anybody’s for the taking (Sukhdeo); then we are told the army was rounding up stray cattle (Roberts). Seems rather unusual that the army in pursuit of treasonous rebels would allow itself to be slowed down with rounding up cattle. Thirdly, we are told categorically no Amerindians were killed (Dipoo, Roberts, Singh); yet one writer (Ramsaran) said two were killed in his area. The Amerindians that we can identify are Victor Hernandez of Hiawa (Killed by rebels? \*1), and Thomas James of St Ignatius. We are told that no one opposed the army, yet we are told of four serious injuries (wounded persons flown immediately to G/town) and the **loss of nine lives** by Mr LFS Burnham (\*1). Army documents also said that there was a **confrontation** (\*4) and also mentioned that 4 members of the GDF were seriously injured. It is hard to imagine anyone deliberately misleading Mr. LFS Burnham.

### **The credibility of the Questioners of the Army/Govt’ version of the Quelling**

Mr Joe Singh (and others) has questioned the credibility of the sources and scenarios that I had cited as: “These are merely figments of the fertile imagination of the feeble.” I had listed the various sources that query the situation. Dr C. Jagan, then leader of the opposition was the first to raise the issue. As far as I can find he never retracted his statement. Yet, Mr Joe Singh (and others) served under President Dr. C Jagan as his Chief of Staff (COS, or CO). I can find no record where Mr J. Singh (or any other officer) said: Sir, I cannot accept your offer, since you have maligned my ‘brother in arms’ and I, and members of the security forces who were involved in the Rupununi operation (or something to that effect). I would think that as a matter of principle Mr Singh (and others) would say, I/We would only serve as your COS (or CO), if you publicly withdraw your statements. Nor do I find any record of any official of the GDF asking President Janet Jagan to retract the statements of her husband and that of the PPP.

Like it or not, two of the best brains (at that time) in PPP were Mr V. Teekah and Mr Ranji Chandisingh, hence their defections to the PNC was hailed as a major coup. Mr LFS Burnham went after the best and brightest to serve him and his interests. Mr Chandisingh was therefore judged highly competent and sane by the President LFS Burnham, yet we have no public record of Mr R. Chandisingh retracting his statements about the Uprising or his being asked to do so in 1976. (I am certain that these highly intelligent gentlemen think that they could do more for the nation by being inside the Govt. rather than being outside. It was even thought that in this way the PPP was infiltrating the PNC. The high placing of these defectors even angered hard-core PNC-supporters. They were resented, yet to their credit, they never recanted what they had previously said or believed in)

It is hard to dismiss these men and the PPP leadership, since they (recognizing threat from outside) even proposed and supported the formation of the People’s militia.

Dr. Walter Ramsahoye, medical practitioner, told the Disciplinary Forces Commission of Enquiry (DFC) headed by Commissioner David Granger that with regards to the Rupununi Uprising... “if there were human rights investigations, many persons who participated in the quelling would be subject to criminal charges in the world Court.” (SN, August 27, 2003). I have no record of Dr. W. Ramsahoye withdrawing his statement. (Curiously, Mr Granger never challenged his statement.)

I now cite Professor Perry Mars (Professor of Africana Studies, Wayne State University): “The 1969 Rupununi Uprising, for instance, represented an open armed rebellion among Amerindians demanding secession of the hinterland region where this group was concentrated. The brutal suppression that followed saw an untold number either killed or migrated to neighbouring Venezuela, which was said to have been complicit in the rebellion (\*4).” This paper was cited by Ms Joy Moncrieffe’s regional Background paper for the UNDP’s Human Development Report 2004 (See Table 5 on page 46, \*5).

The **US Library of Congress (1992)** document (\*6) states: “With **Venezuelan** backing, several prominent ranching families and Amerindian followers in the southern part of the disputed region began an **uprising**. The rebels launched a surprise attack on the police outpost at Lethem on January 2, 1969, and several policemen were killed. **The government flew police and military forces to the region with orders to raze everything. Only livestock and cattle were spared.**” (Gentlemen, You are free to take this up with Ambassador Mr. R. Bullen, when you go to apply for a US visa)

The other witnesses were the numerous indigenous peoples who told their story to Mr Damon Corrie, and who commissioned a study to document the allegations (\*7). These stories could not be coming from ‘feeble minds’, but rather from tortured souls. It is rather callous and unfair to dismiss the eloquent and heartfelt writings of Mr G. Marco, who saw the good and the ugly (and still recalls the horrors of that time so vividly) as a ‘feeble mind’. How can one expect others to come forward and tell their story if they are treated so disrespectfully?

The **US Library of Congress (1992)** document (\*7) put it really well when it states: “Although the rebellion was not a large affair, it exposed underlying tensions in the new state and the Amerindians’s marginalized role in the country’s political and social life.” (No mention of fear of Cannibalism)

(Incidentally, ‘fertile imagination and feeble minds’ are mutually exclusive terms, i.e., one can be one or the other not both at the same time. Einstein – ‘Imagination is more powerful than knowledge’ - in search of the truth)

### Conclusion

One must therefore conclude that the people who question the conduct of the army and security forces were/are credible witnesses in any court. The writings of the military and Govt/ personnel only raise more questions than providing answers. There are too many credible sources to be ignored any longer. The information was there, all it needed was for someone to put them together and tell the story.

If an analogous situation were to occur in Buxton, there would have been such an outcry for an outside UN investigation. All the Caribbean Academics, Human/Civil rights, Cultural groups, etc. would be championing the cause. Why the resounding silence in this case?

Despite what we (pro and cons) write, the only way we can remove this cloud of suspicion that hangs over the military/security forces for its work in the Rupununi is for there to be an outside, UN, enquiry into the incident. All would be given due process. That seems only fair.

Mr. Damon Corrie is willing to go to the World Court (\*8), what is wrong with accepting his challenge? Are we afraid of the truth?

Out of respect for Mr J. Singh and the former GDF officers, I have to respond to their charges that others and I are seeking to tarnish the image of the army. I shall seek to set the record straight in another letter. I do appreciate their time and efforts in helping us to set the record straight. The ongoing discussion shows we are becoming a healthy society. The forces of history usually prevail and the truth will come out despite the odds.

References:

\*1. Odeen Ishmael. [http://www.guyanaca.com/features/trail\\_diplomacy\\_pt5.html](http://www.guyanaca.com/features/trail_diplomacy_pt5.html)

\*2 David A.Granger. Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies Redes 2003

<http://www.ndu.edu/chds/redes2003/Academic-Papers/8.Internal-Security/6.Threats-Caribbean-Security/1.%20Granger-final.doc>

\*3 GDF <http://www.gina.gov.gy/archive/features/f041108-2.html>

\*4 Perry Mars. Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 38, No.3, pp353-372, 2001.

\*5 Joy Moncrieffe.

[http://hdr.undp.org/docs/publications/background\\_papers/2004/HDR2004\\_Joy\\_moncrieffe.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/docs/publications/background_papers/2004/HDR2004_Joy_moncrieffe.pdf)

\*6 US Library of Congress, Countries studies, Guyana , Relations with Venezuela

<http://www.country-studies.com/guyana/relations-with-venezuela.html>

\*7 US library of Congress, Country Studies, Guyana,

<http://www.country-studies.com/guyana/independence-and-the-burnham-era.html>

\*8 PanTribal Confederacy <http://www.pantribalconfederacy.com/confederacy/report1.php>

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