

The Captivity and Trial of the Amerindians after the Rupununi Uprising in Guyana.

Today, Jan 2nd 2007 marks the 38th Anniversary of the “Rupununi Uprising” in Guyana. I have commented on the Uprising and its aftermath on those who did not run. Today, I bring you a glimpse of that trial. The PNC Govt. had no legal instrument to detain citizens for prolonged periods of time without being charged; therefore they rushed the National Security Act through Parliament in Feb 1969. This act was vigorously opposed by the Dr Jagan and the PPP. (The same Act was later used to suppress political dissidents and opponents.)

The Commissioned Pan Tribal Confederacy Report on the aftermath of the Rupununi Uprising (www.pantribalconfederacy.com), Guyana, tells us that:

“326 Makushi and Wapishana men and boys between the ages of 14 - 61 were severely beaten, some into unconsciousness. 147 Makushi and Wapishana men and boys were arrested and sent to Georgetown. An Estimated, 70-100 Amerindian males (mostly Makushi) were shot and killed by soldiers of the Guyana Defence Force who roamed the north Rupununi Savannas exacting a heavy retribution on the Makushi tribe for being the principal tribal participants in the failed rebellion.”

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 a public trial. Hence only the able-bodied were publicly tried. Medical personnel were not allowed in the area; nor were seriously injured persons taken to the city for medical treatment nor were any medical treatment offered to those who awaited trial in the G/Town lock-ups.

They were held in custody for a month before any charges were laid against any of them. The under mentioned description properly expresses the bewilderment and intimidation of the captives as analogously told in one of their previous old poems:

The Massacre and the Pursuit.

“Alas! Why are we captives here?
Why forced to bear, by fate severe.
The plunder of our homes?
Why have we seen our fathers slain?...”

Five youthful maidens thus bewail
Their heavy lot: until words fail,
And tears alone remain.
But their stern captors cry, “Beware!
And patiently your burdens bear,
Or you the bloody fate shall share
Of those before you slain!”

The above was taken from: Legends and Myths of the Aboriginal Indians of British Guiana, Edited by William Henry Brett, (1870) (Published by Williams Well Gardner, London.)

This is how eyewitness Englishman, Mr W.M. Ridgwell (The Forgotten Tribes of Guyana, Published 1972 by Tom Stacey, London), described the scenario: “The accused were roughly

handled and treated as guilty persons from the start, and were initially denied advice, assistance and legal aid from outside. They had to sleep on concrete floors-many of them half-naked, and some were half-naked when taken from goal to appear in court. The luckless accused, in the main, were bewildered natives, unfamiliar with town life, not comprehending English, and all denied access to friends and held captive by a race not sympathetic to them and only too ready to treat them accordingly. In fact, eighteen of their number, after suffering a month of incarceration, were deemed innocent and were discharged and taken home under escort. They had been wrongfully held, or at least no charge could be brought against them.”

“Before this, in their successive appearances in court, **they were manacled together in fives, escorted by policemen and soldiers pointing rifles at their bellies, and surrounded by unrestrained mobs yelling for blood.** These were ugly scenes in Georgetown.”

“Public sympathy was aroused. A group of independent citizens retained an Indian ex-magistrate (name not given) to represent the accused until arrangements could be made for a team of lawyers to undertake their defence. A defence fund was established from private donations and social money-raising functions. It was on the insistence of that ex-magistrate that the shackles were removed; that future proceedings were held in a court away from the bloodthirsty mobs; and an interpreter provided, since few of the prisoners understood English, and knew only Wapishana, Makushi, or Brazilian Portuguese. It took a whole month to secure, in Guyana’s capital city, these rudimentary elements of justice.”

“It was not until the spring of 1970, after yet another trial, that the remaining victims, having endured fifteen months’ incarceration in goal, were released, and even then their troubles were not over. Political victimisation was evoked. Nobody would give them work. People sympathetic to them were too afraid of political recrimination to employ them.”

I was told that a report of “Day Clean” had stated that the Burnham/PNC Govt was taking ‘advantage’ on the Amerindians, now we have an idea of what that meant.

The irony of these images (chains, shackled, alien settings, etc) was lost upon the Burnham/PNC Govt and its PNC-instigated bloodthirsty mobs, the same people who rightly proclaimed and condemned the brutal past injustices meted out to them during slavery and indentureship. Yet sadly when their opportunity arose they inflicted the same condemned acts to an even more vulnerable people. The oppressed have now become the oppressor, but with an even greater vengeance. Are we going to have a call for an apology, justice, and compensation to be made to the Amerindians?

The National Security Act was engineered during the tenure of one of Guyana’s finest legal mind as AG. At this time in our history, we also had in Guyana some of the brightest legal minds in the entire Caribbean. They were silent.

But there is hope, for in that darkest hour, some stood up and their efforts made a difference to their fellow human beings. (Anyone knows the name of the Ex-Magistrate?). It took courage, and we can all learn that a brave few can make a big difference despite the odds.

Yours sincerely,
Seelochan Beharry

25th Dec, 2006