

Welcome Remarks

by

Hon. Moses Verasammy Nagamootoo,

First Vice-President and Prime Minister of the Cooperative Republic
of Guyana

(performing functions of the President)

at the

Opening Ceremony of the United Nations Human Rights Council
Workshop for Least Developed Countries and Small Island
Developing States

on the

Occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of
Human Rights

Excellency, Mr. Vojislav Šuc, President of the United Nations Human Rights
Council - Twelfth Cycle (2018)

Excellency, Mr. Colin Granderson, Assistant Secretary-General, Directorate for
Foreign and Community Relations – CARICOM

Mr. Eric Tistounet, Head of the Human Rights Council Branch, Office of the High
Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Ms. Mikiko Tanaka, Coordinator of United Nations Organisations in Guyana

Other Officials from Caricom and the United Nations

Esteemed participants from Caricom, African, Asian and Pacific states

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Guyana is pleased to co-host this United Nations Human Rights Council workshop for Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries in partnership with the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights and CARICOM.

It is commendable that the Human Rights Council has made it possible, through its Trust Fund Initiative for Latin America and the Caribbean, for participation by our countries in the work of the Human Rights Commission. We are pleased that for the first time one of our regional states, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, has been elected to the Human Rights Council. Congratulations!

It is important to note and acknowledge the contribution of the many big and more prosperous states to enable the presence of least developed countries and small-island developing states at the common table to review the changing landscape of human rights issues and to hammer out solutions to specific as well as global challenges.

This is a collaborative approach. It should eventually result as the only acceptable standard of engagement among, and participation by, all UN member states at the level of the Human Rights Council.

It is expected that the Workshop which commences after this ceremony will take forward the mandate of the Trust Fund, to achieve, *inter alia*:

- a) capacity building with regard to international human rights laws and systems;
- b) specific training on the overall functioning of the Human Rights Council;
- c) human rights e-learning tool; and
- d) exchanges through workshops by LCDs and SIDs on the challenges, achievements and lessons learned in protecting and strengthening human rights globally.

As we observe the 70th year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, troubling developments are taking place in many parts of the world, where human rights are challenged. Our countries should not only share opinions on these developments but should reaffirm commitment to fundamental human rights, which include the respect for the sanctity of human life, the protection of journalists, free speech and plural, even critical, media.

While the Declaration affirmed that the inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, after 70 years, we continue to battle with problems over respect for basic human rights. In several parts of the world these rights are compromised on untenable grounds of race and ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender and sexual orientation, immigrant or refugee status, and colour and nationality.

Most Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries such as the Caribbean have diverse, multi-ethnic populations, and have tried to promote integrated human rights – political as well as socio-economic and cultural rights; and fundamental civil rights such as free speech, free movement and association.

Guyana is one such least developed country in the Caribbean, which has an enviable record for full protection of all fundamental human rights. The Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana guarantees freedom of the individual, equality of women, (and here, in local parlance, we say “women run things”) the right to education, etc. Citizens are protected from discrimination on the basis of their race, ethnicity, sex and gender. This is true in other Caribbean states as well.

But, for us, human rights go beyond periodic elections and the election and/or removal of governments.

In Guyana, for example, our Constitution enshrines education as a social right. For us literacy is fundamental to human rights. It enables our people to live full and meaningful lives. This includes literacy in the use of electronic and digital media. In order to guarantee this right, the State's duty is to provide education, regardless of gender, to prepare students to deal with social issues and to meet the challenges of the modern technological age.

On November 12 last, Guyana held its second local government elections within three years. The outgoing American Ambassador, who was among those observing the poll, said that there could be disappointment over low turnout of voters, but the process was free, fair and credible. Held in the backdrop of only two such elections being held in the previous 50 years, the envoy quite rightly concluded that the recent local elections were a triumph for democracy.

Guyana is developing a system of open, participatory democracy, which protects the fundamental right of citizens to choose their leaders directly, at the level of what we call "the grassroots".

But human rights in our Region have assumed a broader dimension such as treatment of economic refugees. Faced with a feared economic melt-down next-door, Venezuelans have crossed the border into Guyana as refugees. We provide food, medicine and shelter on a humanitarian basis, and grant temporary stay to those who enter our country with valid travel documents. We believe that refugees also have human rights.

While Guyana is a developing, mainland South American country, we are integrally a Caribbean state and part of the Caribbean Community. Most of Caricom's member states are small islands, which are periodically ravaged by natural disasters and effects of climate change. Guyana and the rest of our Caricom brothers and sisters have responded to such disasters, on an island by island needs basis, with active solidarity. We respect the human rights of disaster victims for material, emergency assistance and for technical support in times of distress.

Your Workshop is taking place in Guyana at a time of great expectations that we could emerge from our centuries-old poverty and dependence and grow exponentially from anticipated oil revenues. We

have to balance economic growth with social justice, and to ensure that the human right of future generations to the good life is guaranteed and protected.

You, young participants, will become the new human rights advocates and governance leaders of the Caribbean. We look forward to your exchange of experiences and dialogue among small states as well as for human rights solutions. We also expect that you would craft a roadmap for the Caribbean in its work with the Council.

Welcome to Guyana. Enjoy our Guyanese hospitality and, the vast landscape and beauty of our green state.

*