

GUYANA MUST FIND A WAY TO PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

July 23, 2002

The Carter Center has worked in more than 65 countries around the world, but I hold a special place in my heart for the Guyanese people. For this reason I am deeply troubled by recent events, especially the fatal incidents of July 3. Guyana is at a crossroads. The decisions facing the leaders of the major parties are between a path of self-destruction or a positive future for all the people of Guyana.

Guyanese are capable of tremendous vision and leadership. I recall President Hoyte's crucial decisions - against the will of many in his own party - to reform the economy and bring free and fair elections to his country. When the recent history of Guyana is written, there should be no doubt of his significant contribution. President Jagdeo - young and energetic - has already made his mark on leadership. He has shown a willingness to engage civil society to shape an inclusive and harmonious future for all Guyanese. Civil society in Guyana has played its role. The spirit of civic engagement and responsibility has always existed in the Guyanese people and played a decisive role in resisting and overthrowing slavery, indentureship, and colonialism.

Regrettably, these fragile democratic foundations upon which Guyana must build show signs of serious strain. The challenge of true leadership and civic action is reconciliation. As the two major parties go to congress and civil society asserts its rightful role in governance, the question is whether Guyanese leaders will step back from the edge of the abyss, and together write the next positive chapter of Guyana's hard won democratic history.

Democracy is complex and sophisticated. It is a mistake to equate democracy simply with free and fair elections. Democracy also requires a truly independent judiciary and a legislature that is responsive to the interests of all groups in society. It also requires a free and dynamic civil society, which can oversee the wheels of government and the activities of interest groups and by so doing offer an alternative yet constructive form of political participation. Without the necessary institutions to provide checks and balances, manipulative activists are free to use propaganda, appeals to racism, and other forms of intolerance to further their narrow interests rather than the interests of the nation.

Despite the recent tragic events and the seemingly intractable differences dividing Guyanese society, there are a number of promising things on which to build. Political leaders have taken the first steps in making your Constitution a more democratic and inclusive one. Giving the Opposition a leadership role in sectoral committees would be an important innovation. While additional reforms are undoubtedly desirable - and can be addressed through the standing Committee on Constitutional Reform - the current reforms must be implemented decisively. Civil society is emerging with proposals for inclusive governance and dialogue. This represents an underutilized reservoir of ideas for moving Guyana forward. I strongly encourage leaders to engage the energy and hope of the Guyanese people as expressed through this type of movement. However, it is incumbent upon civil society leaders to ensure that their actions reflect a nonpartisan agenda and to recognize not only their right to participation, but their responsibility to defend and promote a culture of peace and security.

Finally, history has shown everywhere that extremists have no solutions in a divided society, but only the ability to cause grief. I hope and trust that Guyanese can find their way forward, through reconciliation and peace.