

THRONE SPEECH

DELIVERED

by

HIS EXCELLENCY

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

SIR FREDERICK BALLANTYNE, G.C.M.G., MD

ON

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2015

AT

THE FIFTH SESSION

OF

THE NINTH PARLIAMENT

The House of Assembly

Kingstown

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

January 28, 2015

THRONE SPEECH
Delivered by His Excellency Sir Frederick
Ballantyne, GCMG, MD
At the Fifth Session of the Ninth Parliament
Wednesday, January 28, 2015

THEME: Enabling and ennobling all Vincentians

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, it is a privilege for me to address this Fifth Session of the Ninth Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, it is with immense sadness that I refer to the accident which occurred in the early morning hours of Monday, January 12, 2015, in the Owia area. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the funeral service which took place on Sunday, January 25th, as a consequence ill health on that weekend. However, my

thoughts and prayers were with you then as, indeed, they are now. I join with the country in mourning the lives lost. I will continue to pray for the parents, guardians, siblings, relatives and friends, and the teachers and peers of those who are confirmed dead and the two (2) children who are still missing. Please accept my heartfelt condolences. I pray, also, for the swift recovery of those who were injured and for the healing of the affected communities and this entire nation.

Tragedies such as these are difficult to comprehend. However, they serve as stark reminders that we need to draw closer to God, and dedicate ourselves anew to serving Him. We must also live in deeper unity with each other, giving support to, and drawing comfort and strength from our fellow citizens, while casting aside all the elements which seek to divide us.

Mr. Speaker, for many of us, January 12th evoked memories and emotions of the Christmas Eve disaster of 2013. For much of 2014, we sought to recover from the extensive and far-reaching effects of those occurrences. The effects remain with us as we remember the lives lost and disrupted, as well as the material possessions and infrastructure which sustained damage or were destroyed. The effects were unprecedented. The health system was impacted, as was agriculture, particularly evident in the forestry sub-sector. Housing and public infrastructure also received significant damage. In the space of a few short hours, this country lost 17.5% of its GDP, a loss which amounted to over \$330,000,000.

Mr. Speaker, the task of rebuilding continues as my Government carries out its agenda of restoring lives and

livelihoods, reducing vulnerability, and meeting the needs of the victims of the December 2013 floods, Hurricane Tomas and the floods of 2011. The Housing Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Programme is one significant aspect of the work that commenced early in 2014 and which is set to proceed apace this year. A sum exceeding \$20 million dollars was allocated to these activities in 2014 and was utilized in part in the construction of over one hundred (100) new, high-quality houses for individuals and families who lost their homes or whose circumstances were such that remaining at their original locations would have left them in peril in the event of another significant adverse weather event. In addition, support has also been provided to affected households in the form of construction materials to facilitate minor repair works on damaged homes.

Mr. Speaker, thirty two (32) houses remain to be built and work is ongoing to identify suitable lands on which they can be constructed. This poses a substantial challenge in a country such as ours where usable land space is limited and the competition among sectors for land and land use is great.

Mr. Speaker, one year ago my Government and, in fact, this entire country was facing the daunting, to some persons, even impossible task of rebuilding after a disaster which had catastrophic impact on a significant portion of our population and also had the potential for extensive, debilitating effects on the economy. So much has been accomplished in such little time that we run the risk of taking it for granted. Some thought must, therefore, be given to just what it took to surmount the huge obstacles presented by the Christmas Eve floods.

Mr. Speaker, the sound leadership demonstrated by my Government was evident throughout the recovery and reconstruction process. Fundamental to this quality leadership is the will to enable and ennoble all citizens, including the vulnerable and displaced, towards the pursuit of personal excellence and self-actualisation. Circumstances which had the potential to cast disaster victims into poverty or even indigence were converted instead into opportunities to ensure improved living standards and greatly-reduced vulnerability to natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, my Government accepts that there will always be vulnerability to natural and other types of disasters. My Government also recognizes that effective planning and preparation are central to disaster reduction, mitigation

and management. To this end, the National Emergency Management Organisation (NEMO) has prepared a new and revised Comprehensive National Disaster Management Strategy which focuses on disaster risk reduction and aims to build safer, more resilient communities in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The main objectives are to mitigate against loss of lives and minimize costs associated with the impact of hazards.

Initiatives under this national strategy for 2015 include the construction of four (4) satellite warehouses which will be stocked with emergency relief supplies. These will be located in Rose Hall, Georgetown, Bequia and Union Island, and will be completed with funding from the World Bank. A new national emergency telecommunications (EMCOM) system will also be installed which will enable NEMO to create a network of radios throughout the

country for use in the event of emergencies. These radios will be placed at health centres, police stations and other public offices throughout the country. Ambulances and other government vehicles will also be equipped with mobile radios.

Mr. Speaker, the emergency alert system will be enhanced with the completion of the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP). In the initial phases of the implementation of this new alert system, Radio Data Systems (RDS) will be distributed to radio stations which will then equip them to receive notifications of hazards and emergencies. The same will also be made available to government institutions and communities. The system is currently being installed and tested and will be fully operational in 2015.

Mr. Speaker, the National Emergency Management Organisation (NEMO) has also prepared a revised National Volcano Emergency Response Plan which will be rolled out in 2015. Communities in the high-risk areas will be exposed to appropriate training, including evacuation and shelter management procedures. NEMO will also provide ministries, agencies, groups and individuals required to work in the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) with formal guidelines and terms of reference. These documents were produced with support from the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA).

Mr. Speaker, my Government's policies on housing and social protection for the youth, elderly, poor, disadvantaged, disabled and vulnerable will be given further tangible expression in 2015 with the ***Lives to Live***

Programme, among others. Programmes such as these are intended to improve the standard of living and quality of life of the vulnerable and to foster social inclusion by equipping them materially and otherwise to participate in and contribute to society. Over the course of the coming months, approximately one hundred (100) homes will be constructed for disabled persons throughout the country with the appropriate amenities. In addition, improvements and additions, including bath and toilet facilities, will be made to existing homes so as to better address the needs of the disabled.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development will also undergo expansion to several of its more established programmes aimed at enhancing its capacity to meet the needs of its clientele. These include the Home Help for the Elderly Assistance Programme; formal, structured activities

that support the rehabilitation of truant students, the re-integration of teen mothers into the education system, and the encouragement of youth entrepreneurship development, along with other services targeting at-risk youth; and programmes to assist victims of violence and abuse. Further work will be done in 2015 to address related issues legislatively, to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and to increase efficiency with regard to reaching those in greatest need.

Mr. Speaker, much emphasis will continue to be placed on the health sector during 2015. The core principles of access, affordability, equity and quality continue to inform efforts in this area.

Mr. Speaker, the health sector has overcome significant challenges in the recent past, not least among which were the December 2013 floods which caused extensive damage to several sections of the country's main healthcare facility, the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital. Through the efforts of the staff, the wider community, and regional and international partners, the sector was able to restore standards of healthcare to pre-disaster levels and to effect improvements in some areas. The CT scanner that was irreparably damaged by the flood waters has been replaced with a machine procured through the joint efforts of the National Insurance Services (NIS) and the Bank of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The Paediatric Unit has been completed and is again operational as a result of the invaluable input of the Mustique Charitable Trust and the International Children Hospital. The necessary mitigation work will be undertaken in 2015 to minimize the possibility

of a recurrence of flood damage to the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, as part of the Leeward Highway Rehabilitation Project.

Mr. Speaker, several other issues tested the healthcare system of this country in 2014, including the introduction of the Chikungunya virus to the population which had had no prior exposure and, therefore, no resistance to the disease. The sector is also confronted with the still-looming threat of Ebola. Efforts to acquire and put in place the requisite facilities and resources to respond effectively to this threat remain a priority.

Despite all this, the work to modernize the sector and improve the delivery of healthcare continues. Funding under the 10th EDF project is being directed to the

refurbishment of the Female Medical and Maternity A wards of the main hospital. The Operating Theatres, the Dietary Services Unit and Physiotherapy Services area are also being improved.

Mr. Speaker, other initiatives currently in the planning or construction phases include polyclinics at Buccament and Marriaqua; the modern medical complex at Georgetown, which is nearing completion and is due to be commissioned later this year; the renovation of the hospital at Port Elizabeth, Bequia, which is in its final stages; the complete refurbishment of the Mental Health Centre at Glen, and improvements to accommodations for medical personnel, at Sandy Bay, Chateaubelair, Canouan and Union Island.

Mr. Speaker, the improvements to facilities, equipment, and the continued training and development of staff is part of a National Health and Wellness Promotion strategy aimed not only at the diagnosis, treatment and management of diseases, but fostering the total well-being of all citizens. The results of the recently completed National Health and Nutrition Survey are currently being analysed and will be translated into a Wellness campaign that will begin early this year.

Mr. Speaker, infrastructural development in keeping with the needs of our people and the national development agenda continues to be a major focus for my Government. The December 2013 disaster also left a clearly discernible footprint in this area, resulting in the need to combine the implementation of major projects which pre-dated the

floods with projects focused on rebuilding in the aftermath of the same.

The work on the Vigie Highway Rehabilitation Project continues in phases with assistance from the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and the European Union. Works are nearing completion in Phase 1 of this project, have commenced in Phase III, while Phases II and IV are in the design stages. The rehabilitation of Murray's Road which commenced in 2014 will proceed this year. This is also the case with the Leeward Highway Rehabilitation Project funded by the CDB. The post-disaster rehabilitation work also continues and encompasses the repair and reconstruction of bridges, roads, including feeder and bypass roads, and river and coastal defenses.

Mr. Speaker, the project which has the full attention of the resident population and the diaspora is the international airport, the largest infrastructural project ever undertaken in the history of this country. The Argyle International Airport is on schedule for completion later this year and plans are proceeding towards the operationalising and management of the facility. To this end, a consulting company, the Boyde Group, has been engaged to develop an appropriate management structure as well as address the transition from the E.T. Joshua Airport. The Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority will continue to collaborate with, and provide the necessary advice and guidance to the local authorities.

Mr. Speaker, my Government's foreign relations policy has again borne fruit and proven to be especially critical in the disaster recovery and reconstruction efforts. Traditional

and non-traditional partners contributed quickly and significantly to relief efforts and are also integrally involved in general development initiatives. Mr. Speaker, literal and symbolic bridges are being built through partnerships with friendly countries that will prove invaluable to our citizens in the near and distant future.

This country continues to actively engage with partners through such fora as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Commonwealth, United Nations, and ALBA, among others. These interactions have allowed small and vulnerable states such as ours the opportunity to clearly articulate positions on matters of national, regional and international importance, including the environment and climate change, energy, drug trafficking, health and social development.

Mr. Speaker, greater attention will be paid to the development of foreign policy initiatives with the aim of further capitalizing on and extending the achievements in this area. To this end, a Foreign Policy Framework will be developed and produced to guide national engagements in the various diplomatic arenas.

Mr. Speaker, agriculture continues to be the focus of many initiatives proposed and advanced by my government. On one hand, farmers contend with increased climate variability, crop diseases, and the growing frequency of adverse weather events while, on the other, consumers throughout the world confront the challenges created by escalation in food prices and concerns related to food security. It is in this context that my Government's staunch, unflinching support for persons involved in the industry is best understood.

My Government has stood firm in its support for the farming community and this has inspired greater confidence among stakeholders as evident in increases in the acreage under banana and plantain cultivation. Initiatives led by my Government include the revolving credit facility operated under the Farmers' Support Company, with grant funding from PetroCaribe totaling six million Eastern Caribbean dollars (EC\$6m). Loans have been disbursed to over one thousand (1,000) farmers. For the 2015 fiscal year, a similar provision has been made for the same purpose.

Mr. Speaker, my Government is set to consolidate and extend its achievements in education. The ***One Laptop per Child*** programme continued in 2014 and saw the distribution of twelve thousand, five hundred (12,500)

computers to students at the secondary and post-secondary levels, financed through a five-million dollar (\$5m) ALBA grant, with procurement and administrative support from Dennis Publishing. Teachers received training in the integration of ICT into the teaching/learning process during the summer break. This is certain to enrich students' experience and enhance learning outcomes.

Work on the Education Sector Development Plan 2014-2019 has been completed, while the Child-Friendly Schools initiative has been extended to thirty four (34) of the sixty eight (68) primary schools and is scheduled to be introduced in the remaining schools over the course of this year.

Mr. Speaker, the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College is being transformed through the efforts of my Government. The physical facilities have been modernised and expanded. The new facilities were constructed at a cost of over thirty million Eastern Caribbean Dollars (EC\$30m) with support from the European Union. The improvements are not only evident in the physical plant but are matched by increases in student intake, wider range of programme offerings, collaborations with regional and international universities which recognize the quality of the programmes delivered, the training and development of staff, and the provision of additional student support services at the institution.

Mr. Speaker, the challenges have been great but so have the accomplishments and their positive impact on the lives of citizens. Admittedly, however, there is still much that

has to be done. The 2015 development programme promises to contribute greatly to the advancement of this process.

Mr. Speaker, as I close, I extend New Year's greetings to you and to all the members of this Honourable House. I express the sincere hope that peace and prosperity will prevail in our blessed Nation and that God's richest blessings will attend us all throughout the course of this year and beyond.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I declare the Fifth Session of the Ninth Parliament open.

Thank you.