

# Another Country

Crime, disease and poverty west of Fort Island



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**Original title:** *Another Country. This text is based on the address by Brigadier David Granger, MP, Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> April 2014, on the Motion by Dr. Ashni Kumar Singh, MP, Minister of Finance on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2014, for the Approval of the Estimates of the Public Sector and the Budget for the Financial Year 2014.*

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**Publisher:** Office of the Leader of the Opposition

**Cover:** This cover shows the main street in Mahdia, the administrative centre of the Potaro-Siparuni Region in the hinterland.

**Production Services:** Printed in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana.

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## **1. The hinterland condition**

The hinterland comprises over three-quarters of Guyana's territory. The Barima-Waini, Cuyuni-Mazaruni, Potaro-Siparuni and Upper Essequibo-Upper Takutu (Rupununi) and parts of the East Berbice-Corentyne and Upper Demerara-Berbice Regions – might be most picturesque parts of the country but they are the poorest.

Central government policy over the past two decades has been dangerously dividing Guyana more deeply into two countries. It is creating an East-West divide that separates the lands west of Fort Island on the Essequibo River from those to the East. That policy has perpetuated the disparities, divergences and divisions which hinder development.

The hinterland's population is only about 100,000 but it is home to the greater part of the nine indigenous 'nations.' Its potential wealth – in the form of bauxite, diamond, gold and manganese mining; stone and sand quarrying; logging and eco-tourism – is inestimable.

The hinterland's resources have been exploited for over a century and a half and continue to enrich the national treasury, but its physical infrastructure is inadequate for such vast territory. Its small, scattered population is vulnerable to criminal violence, human trafficking and environmental hazard.

Health problems abound. Hinterland regional hospitals are usually under-equipped and understaffed. Health care suffers from the difficulties of attracting high-level professionals, of evacuating patients and of distributing pharmaceuticals to satellite villages by all-terrain vehicles – often the only means of transportation available.

The hinterland accounts for the greater part of all confirmed cases of malaria countrywide. Malaria is linked to sloppy mining practices, poor solid waste management and weak medical support. Garbage finds its way onto the roadsides and into the drains and waterways, contributing to creating breeding pools for disease-bearing mosquitoes.

Some mined-out areas have degenerated into mosquito-infested wastelands. Its evergreen forests and pristine waterways are under threat. The 2013 outbreak of gastro-enteritis in the Barima-Waini Region was the worst public health calamity since the start of the new millennium. It caused the deaths of at least ten children, although it is possible that others might have died from the disease. The number of persons affected by the disease surged to over 529 when the Government imposed a 'news blackout' and suddenly stopped issuing medical bulletins.

## **2. The hinterland economy**

Economic development is dependent on the hinterland's resources but, paradoxically, administrative policies continue to hinder progress. The country's international attractiveness and competitiveness have been impaired all because of the lack of major investment in public infrastructure and the absence of public services. Collapsing stellingings; an aging fleet of ferries; deteriorating airstrips; broken bridges and impassable roadways have all become major obstacles to everyday commuting, communication and commerce.

The central government's development model has been based on political patronage. Certain communities are targeted for handouts such as all-terrain vehicles, outboard engines, chain saws and solar panels. These gifts are useful and grants are always welcome but they do not constitute a sustainable development strategy. They smother human initiative, extinguish enterprise and encourage a 'dependency' syndrome on the part of the recipients of official largesse.

The government introduced, most recently, a Youth Apprenticeship and Entrepreneurial Programme – YAEP. Members are appointed 'Community Support Officers' and are paid each a monthly stipend

of \$30,000. Young people, however, want permanent institutions and public services, not ad hoc programmes. They want farm-to-market roads, agricultural development banks and extension services and technical and agricultural institutes.

The fact is that jobs are scarce. Young school leavers simply do not have the skills to equip many of them for the world of work and short-term remedies such as YAEP are inadequate. The economy simply is not providing employment opportunities for them.

Indigenous issues remain unsettled. Some *toshaos* have resisted the central government on a wide range of land and other local issues. Toshaos – mainly of the Upper Mazaruni – frequently, collectively expressed “displeasure” over the conduct of proceedings at the National Toshaos Council Conferences. They have complained about undermining of their right to freely speak on issues affecting their communities and to freely express their views on issues which affect them and would have provided an avenue to arrive at possible solutions which would improve their lives.

### **3. Hinterland public services**

The hinterland, like everywhere else in the country, needs reliable public services. The four, hinterland, regional administrative centres – Bartica, Mahdia, Mabaruma and Lethem – need to be quickly upgraded to township status with their own mayors and town councils.

Educational standards are low. Notorious newspaper photographs of students in the Potaro-Siparuni Region – at Kato, fetching wood to cook their meals or at Paramakatoi, fetching water to wash their clothes – tell their own story of official maladministration and administrative neglect. Parents, students and teachers – at Kwakwani, St Ignatius and elsewhere – have had to mount protests to complain about abuses.

Dropout rates for boys and girls in primary and secondary schools in hinterland regions are double the rates for the rest of the country. Failure rates at the annual National Grade Six Assessment examinations are a scandal, with the majority of children failing all four subjects. The Ministry of Education’s recourse has been to blame the victims. Hinterland children are said to perform poorly because of “emotional problems, early adult responsibilities, learning disabilities and parenthood” which were said to be the major contributing factors to children’s dropping out of schools.

Human safety is parlous. Crime, especially banditry, contraband smuggling, robbery under arms, narcotics-trafficking and gun-running are commonplace. The crime of trafficking in persons received scant attention until the Guyana Women Miners’ Organisation shamed the government into acknowledging the extent of the problem. A resolution, not supported by the government side, was passed in the National Assembly demanding a Commission of Inquiry into the scourge.

At the heart of the central government’s ‘syndrome’ of denial has been its annual annoyance at the uncomfortable comments contained in the United States’ Department of State’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*. The USA report in the past stated grimly that, “Guyana is a source, transit and destination country for men, women and children trafficked for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor...”

Hinterland infrastructure is inadequate and could be unreliable and unsafe. Safe, sturdy structures are necessary for present-day, heavy-duty, vehicular traffic. The collapse of the Moco-Moco Bridge temporarily halted travel in the Rupununi. The Kumaka-San Jose Bridge became an expensive nightmare for Moruca residents. Stellingings are essential to the economies of riverain communities. Many of them, built of wood decades ago, have been damaged or are in a state of disrepair. The Parika stelling on the Essequibo River, for example, has become one of the busiest and most important commercial hubs in the country but its infrastructure is inadequate for the increasing volume of daily traffic.

Isolated, but potentially productive, communities are heavily dependent on airstrips for services, supplies and the evacuation of medical cases. Several dozen frequently used airstrips in the hinterland receive only marginal maintenance and this has been a contributory factor to aviation accidents.

The Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development – MLGRD – is the major source of hinterland development problems. The MLGRD seems to be obsessed with the day-to-day, micro-management of local organs. It seems not to have comprehended the complexity of, or to have seen the need to discharge its long-term responsibility for, encouraging economic enterprise and development.

The ‘frontier conditions’ which are tolerated in the hinterland are the result of a combination of executive ignorance and administrative incompetence. They have had catastrophic consequences for those who live and work there and have divided the country into two – the more and less-developed regions. The negligent and absent-minded approach to the way the hinterland must be changed if our citizens – East and West of the Essequibo – are to enjoy a good life.

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*Brigadier David A. Granger is Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly of Guyana*