

# **Rupununi**

*The last frontier*



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## **The region**

The Rupununi – properly called the Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo Region – is the largest Region in Guyana. It has a size of about 58,000 km<sup>2</sup> and is bigger than Costa Rica and six times the size of Puerto Rico. Yet, because of the policies of the People's Progressive Party Civic Administration, the Region remains under-developed.

The Rupununi is part of the central 'peneplane' landform. It is not completely flat and consists mainly of savannahs. The savannah has a lower average rainfall than the rest of the country and has only one rainy season. The savannah itself is about 13,000 km<sup>2</sup> and is bounded by the Ireng and Takutu Rivers to the west; the Rupununi River to the south-west ; the Marudi River to the south-east and the forested foothills of the Pakaraimas to the north and north-east. The vegetation is sparse – mainly grasses, herbs and sedges with widely scattered trees. The biodiversity, however, is unique and requires prudent management and protection for the ecosystem to flourish.

There are over 80 communities, villages and satellite settlements with a population of about 25,000 persons. The main settlements are Annai, Karasabai, Lethem and Aishalton and the main ethnic groups are the Makushi in the north, Wapishana in the south and Wai-Wai in the deep south.

Lethem is the seat of the Regional Democratic Council and is the centre of administration. It is a growing community located on the northern shores of the Takutu River. Named after Sir Gordon James Lethem, who governed British Guiana (1941-1947), Lethem looks across the Takutu into the Brazilian town of Bon Fim. APNU plans to upgrade Lethem to the status of a town with its own mayor and municipal council.

Lethem has an aerodrome with a single 1,888 m (6,194-foot) paved runway with instrument markings but no lighting. The community has several amenities and public utilities – churches; government offices; immigration office; magistrate's court; police station; schools; hospital; electrical power station; fuel station (GUYOIL) water supply; groceries, hardware and general supply stores; hotels and branches of commercial banks.

The vital Lethem-Linden highway, owing to the government's inaction, becomes a near-impassable track in rainy weather. Old wooden bridges sometimes collapse, transportation costs rise and, as a result, push the cost of living beyond the means of most families. Many families have been reduced to having two meals a day. The lack of a network of roads and bridges, is a major obstacle to development.

## **Education**

Education of the young is essential yet, boys and girls drop out of primary and secondary schools. Some of those who remain are unlikely to be functionally literate or numerate. This trend must be reversed by ensuring that every child has a place in school and completes his or her primary education. There are four secondary schools in the Region—Annai Secondary, Aishalton Secondary, Sand Creek Secondary and St. Ignatius Secondary—apart from the many nursery and primary schools.

APNU MP Sydney Allicock has suggested that there is need for a Technical Institute to provide young people with life skills. "Instead of transporting workers of every category into the Rupununi, we can have a ready supply of skills needed for the type of development we need,"

Allicock suggested.

## **Employment**

There are few jobs available in the Rupununi. Apart from Government employees—nurses, officials, policemen, soldiers and teachers and a few businessmen—the major source of employment is in the construction sector. Many young residents do find jobs here. The majority of construction workers are from Georgetown or Brazil. Jobs are the basis of a sound economy and are essential for economic growth. Too many young adults still seek waged labour instead of private enterprise.

Sydney Allicock said that the majority of young people are forced to seek employment in Lethem and Brazil or in low-paying jobs in Lethem as shop attendants. “Young people with five and more subjects are working as shop attendants since there is hardly any other opportunity for them. Those who migrate to Brazil find themselves in somebody’s kitchen or on a farm as farm hands.”

An APNU administration will exploit new avenues for education and training in business practices and will expand opportunities for micro-credit. An APNU administration will expand employment opportunities, especially self-employment.

## **Empowerment**

An APNU administration will ensure that empowerment – especially at the regional and village levels – becomes a process by which citizens deliberate on issues and make the decisions that affect their lives. Community development plans must be aimed at achieving consensus in each village or community rather than being dictated by the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs. Empowerment must not mean a contest that results only in victors and victims.

## **Economic development**

The Region’s villages were able to access grants to fund community projects at a maximum of \$1M each through the ‘President’s Grant’ introduced by the government on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006, merely five months before the general and regional elections. ‘The Grant’ is a monetary award allocated to Amerindian communities to fund the establishment of income-generating projects. Grants are not enough. Residents demand access to micro-credit through a Regional Development Bank. They also demand greater access to the internet and information technology to enable them to communicate more effectively.

*The Amerindian Development Fund (ADF)* was not supported by the combined parliamentary opposition in the National Assembly. This was because of dissatisfaction with the manner in which taxpayers’ money was being used to divide communities and disrespect village councils. The item of the ADF under contention was and still is the *Youth Entrepreneur Apprenticeship Programme (YEAP)*. ADF consists of several components – the President’s Grant’, the Youth Entrepreneur Apprenticeship Programme and economic ventures. The Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund (GRIF) is a component only in those years when there are funds allotted to the ADF.

## **Energy and water**

The Unserved Areas Hinterland Development Project, funded by the IDB, was a start to

providing electrical energy to isolated communities and households. The government did initiate the installation of household solar panels but an independent review indicated widespread failures in panels or switchgear or wiring. Priority should be given to providing schools and health centres with adequate and reliable power. This calls for a substantial increase in both capital and recurrent budgets and training. APNU supports the re-introduction of hydro-electrical power through the Moco Moco scheme.

As climate change impacts on the hinterland, each community needs to take more responsibility for providing itself with water in possibly prolonged dry seasons. This requires not only capital expenditure but also training in water management and maintenance of pumps and pipes. Villages need to store water for livestock, fish and other wildlife in the dry season and restocking in the long rainy season.

### **Land demarcation**

Many communities are not satisfied with the lands given to them. APNU promises to sit down with communities and have them identify the lands that they need and pledge to settle these issues once and for all. Large tracts of land have been given out as mining and forestry concessions. The President, only on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2006, assented to the Amerindian Act which empowered indigenous people to preserve their rights to their land and their way of life among other things. Communities, under this Act, would have a veto over small and medium-scale mining.

### **Primary health care**

Health, as with education, is below the national average. This is related to the shortage of medical staff within communities. Amerindians in the Rupununi, as in other parts of the hinterland, need a higher level of preventative health education, including nutrition and ante- and post-natal care. The so-called state-of-the-art Lethem Regional Hospital is inadequate to serve the needs of the region and is little more than “a glorified health centre at its best.” The hospital is currently not capable of diagnosing simple cases of typhoid. Allicock said: “We need a hospital that is fully staffed, adequately stocked with equipment and drugs; we need specialist doctors; we need at least a general surgeon, not periodically but full time.”

An APNU administration will be one of hope. It will create the conditions for a ‘good life’ for all Guyanese by protecting them from the abuse of their rights and freedoms.

A Partnership for National Unity is committed to “Operation Rebuild the Rupununi.”

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*Brigadier David Granger is the Leader of the People's National Congress and A Partnership for National Unity and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly of Guyana.*