

**THE ON-GOING QUEST TO UPLIFT OUR NATION
FURTHER**

BY

**DR. THE HONOURABLE RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**



**[Address at Victoria Park, Kingstown, St. Vincent and the
Grenadines on October 27, 2016 on the occasion of Our
Nation's 37th Anniversary of Independence]**

Office of the Prime Minister
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
October 27, 2016

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[FORMAL GREETINGS!]

First, let me acknowledge joyfully the huge turn-out of citizens and residents this anniversary ceremony. We thank, too, the Band of the Royal St. Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force, under the leadership of Inspector Daniel Hall, for their splendid musical renditions. We are very impressed with the excellence of the members of the Parade Ground under Superintendent Jackson.

The magnificent turn-out particularly from the young people is heart-warming. Although Independence is for all of us, it is especially for the young. As the poet has advised us, it is blissful to be alive, but it is heavenly to be young!

Today, the 37th anniversary of our nation's independence, is a beautiful day that Our Lord has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it.

Over the past 37 years St. Vincent and the Grenadines has made significant socio-economic and technological progress despite its small geographic and population size, its relative scarcity of material resources, its extremely challenging external economic and political environment, and its vulnerability to natural disasters. Yet, much still remains to be done to improve the quality of our lives and living conditions. I thus strongly urge that we renew our commitment to the on-going quest to lift St. Vincent and the Grenadines further and higher in the interest of all of our people.

Our nation's progress, enhanced prosperity, peace, and socio-political stability have been achieved largely through our own efforts at home, in concert with the considerable assistance of our diaspora, friendly nations abroad, and supportive institutions and peoples regionally and globally, and through the abiding grace and beneficence of a loving God. This combination of a many-sided human effort and divine inspiration ensures our continued upliftment today and beyond. Morning by morning new mercies we see and receive bountifully; and all that we need His divine hand

has been providing. Great is His faithfulness for which we are truly thankful!

We are sincerely grateful too, to everyone, of all walks of life, at home and abroad, Vincentians and non-Vincentians alike, for the contributions, great and small, which have been made, and are being made, to our people's upliftment. Our gratitude is immense; it is heart-felt; and we must proclaim it aloud collectively and in the quiet certitude of our individual beings.

It is right and proper that as we acknowledge our nation's socio-economic and technological advances, we must recognise, too, and lament, our individual and collective short-comings and fall from grace, and be accordingly contrite, and recommit ourselves to do what is better and right. As always, change for the better has to come from, and start with, each of us. As the saying goes: *"Every saint has a past; every sinner has a future"*.

Undoubtedly, we are pained and anguished at the blight of violent crime perpetrated largely through the use and misuse of guns and

bullets by a small group of young men. This affects not only the victims and their families but all of us in this small geographic space called St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Clearly, the solution to criminal violence is not a matter only for the Government and the Police Force.

All hands must be on deck, including centrally all the institutions of the State, the family, the schools, the churches, the media, the political parties, the non-governmental groups, and the communities. [We must redouble our efforts in this battle; and we must sing from the same song sheet in doing so. This is not a subject for partisan political point-scoring].

Still, even amidst the dangers of criminal violence, our country remains safe; and citizen security, though challenged, is sound. Overwhelmingly, our people, of all ages, sex, and social condition, are law-abiding, peaceful, and good-natured. And the violent criminals are given no supportive space in our communities, save and except from a few criminally-connected persons. [My government is determined to root out the small pockets of the

criminally violent conduct in our midst. We are all together on this!]

Fellow-Vincentians, less than one year ago in December 2015, the Unity Labour Party (ULP) was returned to government, in free and fair elections, for its fourth consecutive term. Since then, our government has been very focussed in carrying out its mandate particularly in respect of job and wealth creation; the reduction of poverty and inequality; furthering the revitalisation of agriculture and fisheries; the consolidation and expansion of the education health, and housing revolutions; the near completion of the construction of the Argyle International Airport; the on-going preparatory work for port development and the city at Arnos Vale; the Geothermal Project and other renewal energy initiatives; the repair and rebuilding of bridges and roads; the construction of sea and river defences; the tourism projects at Bequia, Canouan, Mayreau, Union Island, and Mt. Wynne/Peter's Hope; the expansion of telecoms; fiscal, financial, and monetary stability and low inflation; the pursuit of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including the battle against harmful climate change; the

improvement of citizen security; and the further strengthening of good governance, democracy, freedom, and justice.

Be assured that the commencement of operations of the Argyle International Airport is imminent. A formal announcement on this will shortly be made.

Fellow-citizens, our government is implementing its mandate in a complicated and challenging external economic and political environment. Progress amidst these complications, contradictions, and challenges often creates a condition for small island developing countries, like St. Vincent and the Grenadines, that is akin to going up the down-escalator. In the process of navigating these problems and forging credible solutions, our government also has had to resist, rebuke and correct, wrong, even dangerous, ideas and unsound doctrine advocated by some misguided persons who have been turning their ears away from truth and who have been engendering falsehoods and opportunistic mouthings on vital public policies merely to suit their own selfish agendas.

In its rebuttal of damaging, bogus ideas and doctrines at home and abroad, our government takes comfort from the compelling advice tendered by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation, Evangelii gaudium, (The Joy of the Gospel), as follows:-

“---[S]ome people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power, and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile the excluded are still waiting”.

We thus continue in our government to put people at the centre of our socio-economic policies especially as we seek to build a harmonious and just economic system conjointly through the private, cooperative, and State sectors. In this way we can achieve our goal to construct a modern, competitive, post-colonial economy

which is at once national, regional, and global, in our people's interest.

I appeal yet again to all public and private sector employees, managers, and leaders to lift our productivity and delivery of service. Although the bulk of our people are focussed and disciplined at their work-places, there is still a minority who are insufficiently productive. I urge them to do better in their own interest and that of the country as a whole. Let us cut out the lame excuses for under-performance. Everyone has to make a worthwhile contribution.

I am appealing, yet again, also, to our domestic private sector to take full advantage of the economic and business opportunities which are available. I reiterate, yet again, that my government is ever ready to facilitate Vincentian entrepreneurs in establishing or expanding their businesses. My government has been doing this over the years for entrepreneurs in every economic sector; and we want to do even more. Let the trickle of budding or expanding entrepreneurs become a flood; let a thousand flowers of business

bloom. [Our local private sector ought not to be heard merely complaining or grumbling if they sit back and do nothing or allow promising initiatives to wither. For example, in the area of hotel development, I have repeatedly stressed to potential local investors that the State has available land for tourism development. Let us partner together on bankable ventures in this sector, among others. Let us together create more jobs and wealth for our people.]

I urge our students and young persons to prepare themselves well for the future while they enjoy their youthful pursuits in sports, culture, and recreation. Without a sound education and training, your future would be less assured. I beg you to take advantage of the abundant opportunities currently available for education and training. Please seek out proper information and advice on your career path. And put in maximum effort in your endeavours. The future belongs to you; do not waste your life. And please help your colleagues to see the light if they are not as yet sufficiently focused as you are.

Soar with your wings unclipped. You can achieve your life goals. Be mindful always that though you are not better than anyone, no one is better than you. Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive but to be young was very heaven!

To those of our citizens who are poor or indigent and those who are unemployed, you are in my thoughts everyday as my government actively seeks to improve your condition of life and living, sustainably. I hear the voice of pain and anguish of all those who are economically disadvantaged. I know that we have made immense progress in reducing poverty and indigence, but there is so much more to be done in this regard and for livelihoods to be sustained. Thus, the unveiling of the admirable Zero Hunger Project and the ramping up of allied programmes for sustainable livelihoods. [Our government's commitment to eradicating poverty and indigence is grounded not only in a necessary and desirable social imperative but in our acceptance of the God-inspired obligation, as mandated in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and allied sacred texts of the great religions. This war

against poverty must resonate as a noise in our blood and echo in our bones.]

Fellow-Vincentians, I have a few announcements to make:

First, the 110 persons who are employed as temporary clerks, some for several years, in the public service will be employed with permanent status from January 01, 2017. This will provide them with the requisite job security and attendant benefits as public servants.

Second, on the basis of the 2016 CSEC and CAPE examinations 629 students who achieved the requisite standard will shortly receive a cash grant of \$500 each. So, too, would students who passed the Associate Degree programme at the required level at the SVG Community College. This is a continuation of the initiative of our government.

Third, on the basis of the 2016 CAPE examinations, our government has awarded 16 scholarships, exhibitions, and

bursaries for university-level study. Of these, eight are National Scholarships, fully-funded for 5 years of study; five are National Exhibitions, fully-funded for 3 years of study; and three are Bursaries valued at \$60,000 each for 3-year university programmes. These awards cost in excess of \$5 million in the aggregate. Additionally, for the 2017-2018 academic year, the government will grant 70 tuition scholarships to deserving applicants for university study; further, it will continue to finance the economic cost for all eligible students at the University of the West Indies; and the state-owned Student Loan Company will continue to grant annually economically-disadvantaged student loans amounting to in excess of \$4 million to eligible and deserving applicants. All of this, combined with other university scholarships negotiated with friendly overseas governments and supportive institutions, continue to place St. Vincent and the Grenadines on track to have one university graduate per household, on an average, by 2030.

Fourth, the relevant authorities in government, will shortly announce the 100 or so successful applicants in the aggregate for

the coveted places, for the new academic year, in the Registered Nursing and Nursing Assistant programmes. The students in the Registered Nursing programme will continue to receive not only a free education but also a monthly stipend of \$1,000.00. I have been advised that St. Vincent and the Grenadines is the only country in CARICOM with such a generous provision, a special initiative of our ULP government. You may recall that last year, the positions for Nursing Assistants were made pensionable for the first time ever.

All these, and other compelling initiatives for the youths, the elderly, farmers, the working people, will continue to be honoured and implemented despite the economic challenges, with which we are confronted.

Fifth, in another week or two, after a review is completed by the competent authorities, I intend to advise His Excellency the Governor General to order the release of some young men and women who are serving terms of imprisonment for relatively minor offences. I consider that in all the circumstances that these young

persons ought to be given a second chance. This is the internationally-proclaimed year of Mercy by people of faith, and we ought to exercise it appropriately to these young persons and others.

Sixth, the annual duty-free concession for Christmas barrels will commence on Monday, November 14, 2016, and run to December 31, 2016. Last year, there were some 18,000 such barrels.

Seventh, shortly, additional persons will be recruited for the Police Force, the Fire Service, and the Coast Guard.

Eighth, I turn to the further recognition of those of our citizens, at home and abroad, who have made sterling contributions in the fields of sports, culture, education, health, public service, business, and community service. Early in the New Year 2017, our government will announce the naming of various facilities in honour of our distinguished citizens, particularly those who have gone to the great beyond. We must remember them as part of our exercise of nation-building and the further ennoblement of our Caribbean

civilisation. Announcements, too, will be made for a few additional sporting and cultural ambassadors.

And my last announcement today concerns Haiti. I have instructed the Director General of Finance and Planning to transfer an initial US \$50,000 to assist the Haitian government in its relief efforts consequent upon the recent devastation wrought by Hurricane Matthew. The Haitians are our Caribbean brothers and sisters whom we love dearly. They are in our prayers.

Fellow-Vincentians, within a few weeks I will present to Parliament the Estimates for Revenue and Expenditure for the year 2017. Thereafter I will deliver my Budget 2017 in the debate on the Appropriation Bill. Please listen out for our government's continued programmes and some fresh initiatives.

Fellow-Vincentians, as I conclude, I reiterate that today is a day for reflection of ourselves and our history; to think carefully about our past, our present, and our future which is the only time, that it is ours to desecrate. We must truly get to know better ourselves and

our history; to listen more to our parents and grand-parents; to shape a whole son and a whole daughter out of the compromises which history and contemporary circumstances have made us. In this process, renewals and rebirths are not only possible, but necessary and desirable. As we learn from our past, we must not remain stuck in it; we take the present as we find it and make our future better from all our possibilities and strengths, despite our limitations and weaknesses. We must discern truth from facts and let the real world validate the truth. We must not merely build monuments of the Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, our extraordinary National Hero, and other exceptional personalities in our patrimony; their heroic deeds and teachings are better remembered not in marble, stone or bronze but in our hearts and minds, recognising always that despite their greatness that they are mortals with limitations and weaknesses.

And so, today, we renew individually and collectively our quest to uplift ourselves and our nation further. It is our duty to act in furtherance of this noble quest.

Happy 37th Anniversary, St. Vincent and the Grenadines!

Thank you and have a wonderful and blessed day!