

ADDRESS TO THE OPENING CEREMONY OF  
THE UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON  
CLIMATE CHANGE  
FOURTEENTH CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES  
HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT

BY

His Excellency, President Bharrat Jagdeo  
President of the Republic of Guyana

December 11, 2008

Delegates

There is nobody in this room that needs to be convinced of the urgent need for action to avert climate catastrophe. In recent years, the progress that has been made towards a climate solution has been thanks to the heroic efforts of many who are sitting in this hall today. For those efforts, the world should be grateful.

Yet there is a risk that the passionate commitment exhibited by so many here and elsewhere can mask the fact that as an international community, our efforts remain woefully inadequate for the task that we face.

I decided to come to this conference because I believe that we urgently need to change this situation.

In reaching this decision, I was determined not to make the same mistake twice. I was my country's Minister of Finance when the Kyoto Protocol was agreed, and I paid very little attention to it. I failed to see that climate change is not just an environmental issue, but one which cuts to the core of social and economic progress everywhere. It therefore demands first order political commitment.

I also came for two more specific reasons.

One, I wanted to continue to press the case that the next climate agreement must create meaningful incentives to address deforestation.

And two, I am fearful that the movement to address climate change is losing momentum as a consequence of the economic crisis that is engulfing the world. There is a real danger that the current necessary action to stabilize the world's economy will divert attention away from the even bigger crisis that climate change presents.

And unlike the economic crisis which originated in this case from a lack of transparency and a failure of regulation and which may be corrected by anti-cyclical fiscal stimulus packages, climate change is not a phenomenon which will work its way through an economic cycle. Lack of action will make things irreversibly worse, will cause

more human suffering and will be even more expensive to solve in the longer term.

This is the stark reality we face and while I recognise that negotiators come to conferences like this with a specific brief, I also urge you to understand that you are some of the world's leading experts on climate change and you can play an important role in making it clear to policy-makers that they must now make some historic, strategic decisions.

Understanding what needs to be done is the easier part. We know that we need to agree a sufficiently ambitious global target, where global emissions are at least 50% less in 2050 than they were in 1990. And we know that this means creating market or other funding mechanisms that generate new capital flows of the order of many hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

The harder part is building and sustaining the political context needed to make it possible for national leaders to achieve these goals.

For years, people have been saying that the United States of America needs to lead. They soon will - but as we sincerely welcome President-elect Obama's strong public commitment to deep cuts in emissions, we must remain vigilant and ensure that other countries do not back-pedal on their existing commitments. There is an understandable but ultimately damaging dialogue audible in many countries today where some politicians are saying that citizens

cannot be expected to support action to combat climate change during an unprecedented economic crisis when they are losing their jobs and their cost of living is rising. The failure of nerve that this represents will drive away those that are starting to invest in climate solutions, and postpone progress for too long.

Instead, we need to recognize that strong leadership on climate change is needed now more than ever. Some may balk at the scale of financial resources required, believing that resources on this scale are unachievable. But if the political will to stimulate resource flows is there the money will be found – as was proven when the international community quickly raised \$7 trillion to deal with the financial crisis. Moreover, we have frequently heard the justification in countries across the world that banks and other financial institutions needed to be bailed out because they were “too big to fail”. Well, the climate change challenge is far bigger still although this is perhaps not as immediately apparent, and the same logic must apply.

To build public support for the tough action that is needed, we must break the false debate which suggests that countries can either act on climate change or progress their national development. Instead the two imperatives must be aligned.

This is possible – but we need far greater efforts to achieve a paradigmatic shift where the creation of low carbon economies is incentivised not just in today’s developed world, but also in the place where future emissions growth is going to come from.

For forest countries like mine, this means creating low deforestation economies where remuneration for forest carbon services under a properly designed REDD is sufficient in scale to out-compete the other legitimate economic forces which drive deforestation. As things stand, the world economy values the commodities that can be sold by high deforestation economic activity – such as harvesting timber or selling agricultural commodities after the forest has been cleared. But it does not value low deforestation economic development – there is no significant tradeable market for forest carbon storage or other ecosystem services. Correcting this is the only way to reduce deforestation.

And on this issue, I want to address three points to participants in the REDD debate.

One, to those who are negotiating around a REDD mechanism, I ask you to recognise that all forest countries share the same goal – we must ensure that we continue to focus on the big picture and not become obsessed about minute methodological and process issues. If REDD mechanisms exclude any significant group of countries, REDD will fail. So we must therefore work together - REDD must address reducing deforestation and degradation, it must address afforestation and reforestation, and it must address avoiding deforestation.

Two, to those well-meaning NGOs who have advocated that forestry should not be part of a global deal because its inclusion will flood the carbon market, and enable Annex I countries to avoid taking the tough choices needed to reduce their emissions at the scale required – I ask you to recognise that the overall global emission reduction commitments must be deep enough, and if they are then there will be room in market mechanisms to effectively address deforestation, whilst simultaneously ensuring badly needed capital flows to some of the poorest countries in the world.

And three - to others who have suggested that remuneration for carbon services should not flow to forest countries because there is a risk of corruption and mis-use of funds, I ask you to take care that you are not jumping to patronizing conclusions that all poor countries are corrupt. That said, as leaders of forest countries, we need to ensure that we create policies, institutions and incentives that are financially prudent, transparent and accountable to those who live in, and depend on, the forest for livelihoods.

We must also mobilize our people to ensure that they are involved in determining how new carbon resources which flow to our countries might be invested – for example in Guyana's case, we expect that this will mean investment in health, education, clean energy and adaptation investment that will cost several times our GDP.

To conclude - if we see the climate change challenge we face as fundamentally one where political will needs to be built to create the

foundation that enables the right choices to be made, we need to reach beyond the committed activists who are here today and mobilize leaders internationally. This doesn't mean Ministers of Environment – we need the attention of Ministers of Finance, Prime Ministers and Presidents, and I urge them to not make the mistake I made in 1997. Attention has to be dragged back onto climate change, even in the midst of the economic crisis.

But frankly speaking, we need to recognise that leaders can only lead if their people support them in doing so. It may be unreasonable to expect politicians to address issues that are beyond the electoral cycle if their constituents are not calling for action. This is where the NGO community and the UN process have a vital role to play – in educating and sensitizing the peoples of the world. When citizens start to understand climate change beyond a vague awareness that weather patterns are different to what they were, they will become champions of change and demand meaningful action. Then politicians will have to dedicate the same efforts to tackling climate change as they do to dealing with the economy or other important issues.

Advocacy by committed people can change the world – like many countries across Latin America, Asia and Africa, my country has benefited from debt relief which now funds improvements in health, education and other social services. This debt relief was partly a consequence of mass advocacy through the Jubilee 2000, Make

Poverty History and other campaigns, and if we can do it for debt relief, we can do it for climate change.

So I urge all present to use the next two days – not to ignore the detailed methodological issues we face or the important negotiation points that must be agreed, they are vital – but to also lift our sights and gain a perspective on the urgency of the strategic choices that the world must face. Future generations will judge us by our strength in the face of these choices, and I hope we do not let them down.