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High Level Team from US VP Kamala Harris 'Office Visits Guyana

By Laverne McGee

USA Edition Regional Director

President Irfaan Ali, VP Dr. Bharrat Jagdeo and other top Guyanese cabinet members met with an American delegation to discuss food security, energy, climate reliance and Guyana's Low Carbon Strategy. On Tuesday, March 13, 2023 a meeting was held with Joseph Salazar, Vice President Kamala Harris Special Advisor for the Western Hemisphere. Also in attendance at the State House meeting was Michael Taylor, Director for Western Affairs, Office of Caribbean Affairs. The focus was on strengthening bilateral relations between the US and Guyana. Salazar and Taylor also met with business leaders and key stakeholders to engage in discussions of mutual concern, including the US-Caribbean Partnership to address the Climate Crisis 2033 (PACC 2030). The Caribbean is on the front lines of the climate crisis, including sea level rise that threatens low-lying islands and exacerbates storm surge associated with hurricanes. The climate crisis is also compounding the challenges facing Caribbean nations as a result of COVID-19-related economic disruptions. Addressing energy security and building climate resilience is expected to unlock new opportunities and safeguard communities. Vice President Kamala Harris launched this Biden-Harris initiative last year in June. These meetings serve as part of continued discussions to strengthen energy security and promote climate adaptation and resilience. Research, training and financing projects have been part of on going discussions.

The three day visit took place from March 12-14, 2023.

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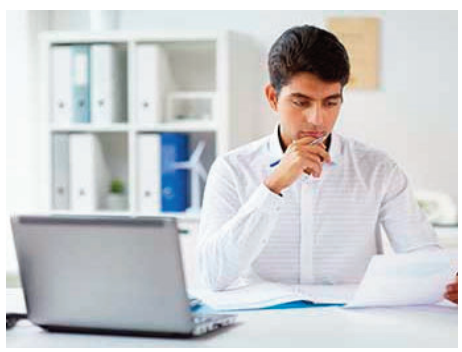

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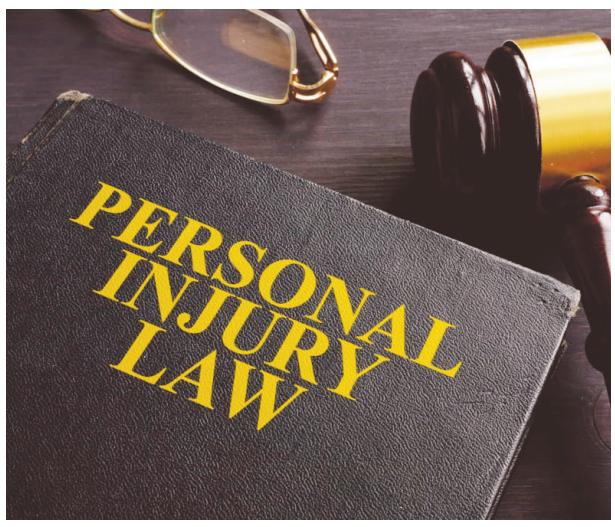

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Guyana looking to expand agri-business

Guyana is gradually moving towards agri-business, as part of the government's consistent plan to acquire higher levels of productivity in the agriculture sector.

The administration recently engaged India for potential collaboration to enhance the local food sector.

"We need the expertise from many parts of the world to transform these industries into agribusiness and with higher levels of productivity," Vice President, Dr Bharrat Jagdeo said during a recent press conference.

"We are hoping over the next few months that a lot of these specialists would be recruited and brought to Guyana to give a big boost to the agriculture sector and expand its productivity," Dr Jagdeo underscored.

One area of focus for collaboration is tissue culture, which allows for the rapid production of high-quality planting material.

Guyana's current nurseries are struggling to supply the necessary materials, but the vice president believes that with the help of Indian specialists and facilities, the country could see a significant boost in productivity.

Vice President, Dr Bharrat Jagdeo during his press conference

Tissue culture allows for the production of millions of plants in a short amount of time, all with the same consistency and productivity.

"It would be a big, huge opportunity for Guyanese to work in these areas. It would be a big boost to say our cane farming industry and we need planting material now of high quality. You can get a million plants in a short period of time. And also, everything else, almost any tree that's grown you can culture it through tissue culture," the vice president explained.

The technology can be applied to a range of crops, from sugarcane and aquaculture to spices and coconut cultivation, which the government is also looking to expand in the future.

In fact, the government is looking to utilise a portion of state land along the banks of the river for coconut cultivation, Dr Jagdeo disclosed.

He emphasised the potential for job creation and economic growth in these areas, which could benefit Guyanese farmers and the country as a whole.

India's expertise in agricultural research and development makes the country a natural partner for Guyana in its endeavour.

With the ability to feed over 1.4 billion people through highly productive and sustainable methods, India's collaboration could prove invaluable to Guyana's agriculture sector.

Dr Jagdeo said there is also potential collaboration in biogas and biofuels, while stressing the need for sustainable and environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

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Ontario's health care goals may be elusive due to staffing shortage

By Vasant Phillip
LJI REPORTER

A shortage of frontline workers has been cited as one of the key reasons Ontario may fall short of its healthcare goals, a new report from the province's fiscal watchdog suggests.

In a report released Wednesday, the Financial Accountability Office (FAO) found that Ontario will be short about $21.3 billion in health spending by 2027-2028. As a result, it is "unlikely" the province will achieve its goals of adding enough beds and hiring enough staff to keep up with demand.

According to the FAO, the government has allocated about $87.8 billion to be spent on health care by 2027-2028. Spending, however, is expected to grow to about $93.8 billion.

The government could either increase their financial investments or use money from contingency funds or federal transfers to address the shortfall, the report said.

"Alternatively, the province could make program cuts or changes to its expansion commitments to achieve its health sector spending plan targets."

The projections also don't take into account a court challenge loss on Bill 124—legislation that capped public sector workers' salaries at one per cent for three years. The government is appealing a ruling that found the bill infringes on the applicants' rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

If it loses, the province will be on the hook for an additional $3.6 billion in wages.

The report reviews five government priorities as outlined in multiple versions of Premier Doug Ford's health-care plans and paints a dire picture of Ontario's strained health-care system.

"This is 34 per cent higher than wait times over the five-year period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the longest average wait time recorded in over 15 years."

The report also noted there is a 250,000 patient surgical backlog in Ontario as of September 2022. The province has indicated they want to reduce the waitlist by 50,000—pre-pandemic levels—by end of March 2023. In order to do this, the Progressive Conservatives have put forth legislation allowing private clinics to perform some OHIP covered surgeries as well as diagnostic procedures.

Despite these measures, the FAO notes the province is not likely to reach its goal.

"Assuming no further interruptions, similar volumes of surgeries being performed and similar volumes of patients being added to the waitlist, the Province is on track to reduce the surgical waitlist back to 200,000 patients by July 2024."

Report says Ontario is falling short of health care goals

Last year, Ontario logged 145 unplanned emergency department closures as a result of staffing shortages and higher-than-usual capacity.

The FAO noted that prior to 2022, its office was only aware of one unplanned ER closure due to a lack of doctors since 2006.

The province has committed to freeing up about 7,000 hospital beds by 2028—4,500 new beds will be added, while an additional 2,500 occupied by alternative level of care (ALC) patients will be made available.

The Ford government put forward legislation in September that would allow hospitals to fine patients waiting for a spot in long-term care a daily $400 fee if they do not accept a bed in a facility not of their choosing. This would, the ministry of health said at the time, free up space for acute patients who needed hospital care.

However, the FAO says the province is unlikely to achieve this given the funding shortfall and the length of the waitlist for long-term care, which makes moving ALC patients challenging.

Canadian travellers facing higher airport fees

Canadian travellers are facing increased airport fees after the pandemic grounded revenues and led to more debt for airports across the country.

COVID-19 disrupted the airport sector's "relatively stable" and resilient business model, as Canadian airports have added around $3.2 billion in combined debt, DBRS Morningstar said in an analysis note on Monday.

Unlike American airports, which received significant financial aid during the height of the pandemic, Canadian government subsidies mostly targeted airlines rather than airport authorities, according to the credit rating agency.

The latter only benefited from "modest" support, such as Transport Canada's Airport Critical Infrastructure Program, launched in May 2021, which provides $571.2 million over five years.

"The Canadian government has not demonstrated a willingness, or perceived a material need, to provide significant financial support to Canadian airports," the agency stated.

During the pandemic, Toronto Pearson International Airport twice increased its airport improvement fee by $5 to $35 for departing passengers. That followed losses of $383 million and $350 million in 2020 and 2021, respectively.

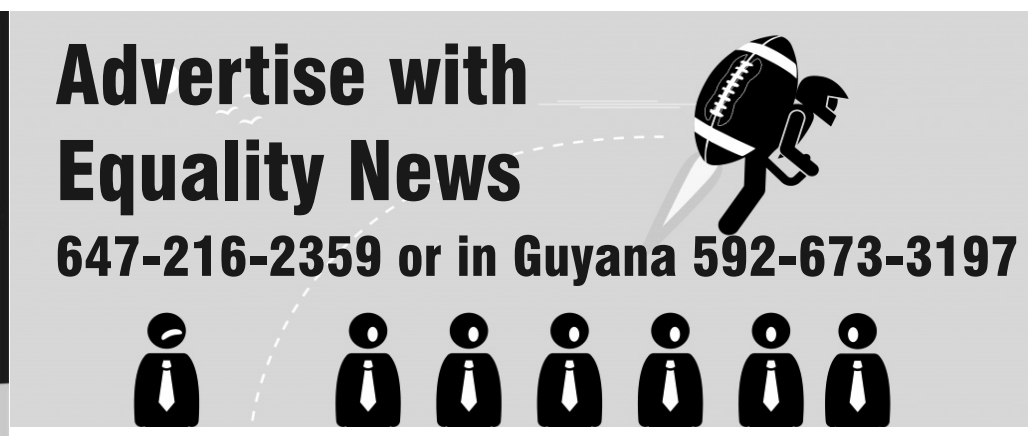
That fee similarly rose at Montreal's Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport from $30 to $35 in 2021. The Regina Airport Authority plans to hike airport improvement fees by $10 per departing passenger to $30 on April 1.

Airports' operating costs and capital expenditures are also on the rise due to inflation, per the agency. Tariff increases have become "necessary" as airports look to restart capital projects at higher costs after many were paused during the pandemic.

"The elevated pressure for Canadian airports to raise fees reflects the combined effect of the increased leverage during the pandemic and the unsubsidized and not-for-profit nature of the Canadian airport business model," the analysis note stated.

"The longer it takes an airport to grow/rebuild traffic and match the designed capacity of facilities, which were developed with borrowed money, the longer such pressure will persist."

The agency said it does not expect a shift in competitiveness between Canadian and U.S. airports to have any material impact on the ratings of major Canadian airports, which remain largely protected by their monopolistic status and resilient demand from consumers.



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EDITORIAL & OPINIONS

Case for the CCJ

Editorial from the Guyana Chronicle

SAINT Lucia has easily cleared all remaining legal hurdles to join Guyana, Barbados, Belize and Dominica in making the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) its final Court of Appeal (CoA), thanks to Prime Minister Philip J. Pierre's Saint Lucia Labour Party-led (SLP) administration's clear fifteen-two majority in the 17-member parliament.

The island will become the fifth CARICOM member-state to so do after the parliamentary process was fast-tracked on February 28 – a week after its 44th independence anniversary on February 22 (and Guyana's 53rd Republic Anniversary on February 23).

The debate in the Saint Lucia parliament featured several highlights of the CCJ's regional and global significance, insulated as it is from political interference by governments through its independent funding base and respected by CARICOM leaders, none of which are known to have ever opposed the regional Judicial and Legal Services Commission's recommendations for appointments of new judges to the court's bench, or its President.

Access to the court is also much easier and less costly to the average CARICOM citizen than to the London-based Privy Council – and CCJ cases are heard online.

During his contribution to the marathon debate on the necessary amendment to the Saint Lucia Constitution, former Saint Lucia Prime Minister, Dr. Kenny D.

Anthony, who initially supervised the drafting of the agreement by the inimitable and distinguished Guyanese legal luminary Duke Pollard while serving as CARICOM's General Counsel at its Secretariat in Georgetown in the mid-1990s, chided those, he said, insufficiently acknowledged the Caribbean's high standing in legal and judicial world history.

He recalled the Caribbean's historical contribution to development of the judiciary in Africa after independence, distinguished West Indian jurists serving among the first Chief Justices in Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe (among others), in the defense trial of Kenya's first President Jomo Kenyatta – and more recently, in the Yugoslavia and Rwanda war tribunals, as well as on top judicial bodies in The Americas.

Dr. Anthony, now in private practice and a back-bencher in parliament since his sixth consecutive re-election in 2021, had responsibility for Justice during his three five-year terms as Saint Lucia's Head of Government – and took umbrage to the view proffered by some in the local opposition United Workers Party (UWP) that the CCJ is "a creature of a UWI Cabal" (referring to The University of the West Indies).

He recalled the strong contribution of "others like Pollard" in preparing the CCJ legislation and defended the integrity of today's CCJ judges and other top Caribbean jurists, many of whom emerged from The UWI's Legal Faculties in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, as well, as the University of Guyana (UG).

Saint Lucia's speedy completion of its CCJ journey cannot easily be repeated outside of a massive election victory or a successful referendum result, but the island never needed a referendum in present circumstances, despite one being demanded by ex-Prime Minister and current Opposition Leader Allen Chastanet ahead of the debate (which he boycotted).

The island will, therefore, soon join the four CARICOM member states that have benefitted from the collective and visionary wisdom of CCJ rulings, highlighting and underlining the fact that Caribbean jurists are no less-capable and more well-placed to deliver justice in this region than the UK-based Privy Council.

Indeed, the rate of hearings of Caribbean appeals at the Privy Council is historically very slow and low, with Saint Lucia registering only 17 appeals in 20 years.

The CCJ is both popular and unpopular for its fair rulings in cases of public interest, from hijacked elections in Guyana and CARICOM citizens' right to vote in Barbados elections, to same-sex relationships and selective travel restrictions and discrimination against Freedom of Movement by Jamaican or Guyanese traders.

A fundamental point emerging from the debate, however, was that unless justice is accessible it cannot be delivered, a feature largely underlined by the comparative costs of access to the Privy Council and the CCJ.

Arguably, no other region in the developing world has defended its regional court greater than CARICOM; and none has had greater influence on the judicial and legal mechanisms of global justice in the past six decades.

It cannot be argued, however, that the Caribbean isn't better set, with every new CARICOM member state joining the CCJ, to see regional citizens making more and better use of their court for appeals – and expressing more confidence in the demonstrated ability of Caribbean jurists to deliver justice on demand, across the region, in full – and on time.

Financing from developed world necessary

Dear Editor,

ACCORDING to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Gutteres, developing countries would require US$500 billion annually to enable them to overcome current levels of poverty caused by currency manipulation, high and unsustainable debt burdens and other structural impediments.

This view is not new. Former President, Dr Cheddi Jagan nearly three decades ago, had written about the "debt trap," which, he said, was not only unsustainable, but was also a big millstone around the necks of poor countries from a developmental perspective.

Guyana at one point under the previous PNC regime was ranked among the highest indebted countries in the world, with debt repayments and servicing consuming over 90 per cent of government revenues.

It was not until after the return of the PPP to office on October 1992 that the debt burden was progressively reduced to sustainable levels.

It is a shame that despite several promises by the developed world to make more financing available to poor countries, not much has been done.

Instead, billions of dollars are wasted on unnecessary wars, raking in billions of dollars in the coffers of the military–industrial-complex and big businesses at the expense of the poor and the underprivileged.

As Mr Guterres pointed out in his recent address at the recent UN-sponsored conference on least developing countries in Doha, Qatar, the time for excuses is over and the rich industrialised nations must live up to the promises made to provide more financing available for poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Guyana, thanks to prudent economic and financial management by the PPP/C administration, is now much better placed to manage its debt obligations. The issue of debt burden, however, still remains a drag on several other low-income countries.

Yours respectfully,
Hydar Ally

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NS RCMP probes two cases of mannequins found hanging from overpasses

By Niraj Sharma
LJI REPORTER

RCMP in western Nova Scotia are investigating two incidents involving mannequins found hanging from overpasses, and the Mounties have confirmed one of the cases is likely related to a violent death reported last year.

The Mounties say the most recent incident happened last Saturday, when an ambulance carrying a patient slammed into something in the dark as the vehicle was travelling on Highway 101 near New Edinburgh, N.S., around 9:30 p.m.

The ambulance was badly damaged but the two paramedics and patient inside were not hurt. The Mounties say the mannequin was dressed in orange clothing and was marked with the phrase, "Justice for Vernon."

On Tuesday, RCMP Cpl. Chris Marshall confirmed in an email that police believe the cryptic message is related to the death of Vernon Doucet, who was the victim of a violent home invasion on Feb. 16, 2022. The 64-year-old died March 12, 2022, after he was placed into an induced coma.

One of the mannequins hanging from an overpass in New Edinburg, NS

Doucet's former home in Concession, N.S., is not far from where another mannequin was found on Feb. 25 of this year.

In that case, a mannequin dressed in a sweater, blue jeans and shoes was found hanging from a Highway 101 overpass near Little Brook, N.S., about 18 kilometres south of New Edinburgh.

In March 2022, Doucet's stepson, Adam Lawrence, told CTV News that he believed the RCMP could be doing more to solve the crime.

At the time, residents in the Concession area had raised a $10,000 reward for credible information about what happened to Doucet, using the online hashtag #justiceforvernon for their fundraising campaign.

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Express immigration programs overstaffed: budget watchdog

By Niraj Sharma
LJI REPORTER

Skilled immigrants might get into Canada faster

Skilled people seeking entry into Canada as landed immigrants might be able to get in faster than expected.

Tthis is because three programs designed to get skilled immigrants settled in Canada faster have more staff than needed to meet the government's goals.

According to a report from the Parliamentary Budget Officer released last week, three "express entry" programs — the Federal Skilled Worker Program, the Canadian Experience Class and the Federal Skilled Trades Program — could meet the government's target of processing 80 per cent of applications to the programs within six months. Quebec does not participate in the three programs.

"Based on our analysis, current staffing levels at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) are expected to be more than sufficient to meet the processing time goal for the next five years," Yves Giroux, the parliamentary budget officer, said in a news release.

"In fact, we estimate that IRCC has 65 per cent more staff than needed to meet their goal this fiscal year."

The report said the department needs about 343 full-time equivalent staff this year to meet its processing target and has 224 excess staff.

But the report adds that the staff surplus will decline to 23 by 2026-27 as the number of applicants to the programs increases.

The government aims to approve 82,880 through the three programs in 2023, with the number increasing to 114,000 in 2025.

The report estimated the gross cost of the programs over the next five years at $792 million but said applicant fees would cover $743 million of that total. The cost to the government this year per admitted permanent resident is an estimated $91.

As of June 2022, IRCC is facing a backlog of 2.4 million immigration applications. Sean Fraser, the federal minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship, said last year that his department would hire thousands of new workers to address the issue.

The federal government is hoping to welcome 1.45 million new permanent residents to Canada over the next three years, including 500,000 in 2025. Ottawa is hoping the boosted immigration targets will help to address labour shortages. A record-breaking 431,645 people became permanent residents last year.

Zero gun deaths in Toronto so far for 2023

Though headlines about violent crime in Toronto appear to be a daily occurrence, there is one bit of good news that has received too little mention: There hasn't been a single fatal gun death yet in Canada's largest city this year.

According to data provided by the Toronto police, at this time last year, Toronto recorded 66 shootings, out of which 13 were fatal. In 2023, so far, there have been 19 shootings — and none has been fatal.

According to Louis March, founder of the Zero Gun Violence Movement, the decline can be attributed to strong government control and the disruption of illegal guns coming in from across the border.

"I have to give credit where it's due," March said. "Over the last few months, border security, RCMP and counterparts in America have done an excellent job interrupting the flow of guns coming across the border. Also, the feds have put money into anti-gang and gun violence strategies," he added.

Recently, the Canada Border Services Agency lay charges in a firearm investigation and arrested a 30-year-old man for smuggling firearms.

In 2022, the Liberal government's Bill C-21 banned some 1,500 models and variants of firearms, including the AR-15 and Ruger Mini-14 on the grounds that they have no place in hunting or sports.

Moreover, Trudeau announced that the government is looking at a "variety of options" to carry out a buyback of banned firearms after the government estimated that there are approximately 150,000 registered firearms in Canada that would be bought back.

Factors that contribute to gun violence: “Nobody is born with a gun in their hand”

According to March, people can get involved in criminal activity because they don't see an alternative, especially in populations that are "stigmatized, denied access, denied opportunity, denied education, or denied employment."

"While some of them do it just to pay bills to survive, they get on a slippery slope. Soon it escalates to a point where they have to pick up a gun," he said.

"Most of the gun violence, or criminal activity, is mostly in neighbourhoods where poverty is one of the biggest challenges. We usually speak about the 'school to prison pipeline.' The social economics create the perfect ingredients for somebody to use violence as a way out. And worse, our solution to it is not dealing with the root causes — but to arrest them, lock them up and throw the key away," he added.

According to Jackie Sultana Sikdar, a second-year PhD student at York University, there are too many obstacles and limitations in terms of cultural, social, and economic spheres that contribute to crime — including gun violence.

"It's very evident with segregated segregated racialized neighbourhoods who have to bear the brunt of stigma of neglect and and of exclusion, and I think that these social-economic factors and disparities really do contribute to gun violence here," she said.

Deepwater port will significantly boost local content, agriculture – CGX

Canadian company CGX Energy, through subsidiary Grand Canal Industrial Estates (GCIE), has asserted that the deepwater port currently under construction on the eastern bank of Berbice River, will significantly boost local content in the oil and gas sector and the agriculture sector.

In a recent financial statement, CGX provided an update on the work that is ongoing on the Berbice Deep Water Port. They are aiming to commence cargo terminal services late this year and begin operating the oil and gas support base in mid-2024.

According to CGX, when the deepwater port is fully operational it will provide important support for the oil and gas sector and opportunities for local content. It was pointed out that due to its location close to Suriname, the port will also help service exploration and development of Suriname's oil and gas sector.

"GCIE expects that the port will significantly boost local content engagement in the oil and gas sector and add enhanced logistics capacity for import and export, including expandable capacity to accommodate the possibility of increased product flow to and from the northern states of Brazil."

"Due to its location close to Suriname, the port's oil and gas support functions will also help to serve the rapidly growing offshore exploration and development activities in that country's oil and gas sector," CGX further said.

Additionally, the port will provide critical assistance to the rice, sugar and agro-processing sector. This is particularly important since Guyana is a frontrunner in the charge to reduce the Caribbean Community's (Caricom) food import bill by 25 per cent by 2025.

Artist's sktech of the proposed Deepwater Port in Berbice

Executive Chairman of CGX Professor Suresh Narine

"The port is expected to add significant capacity to the agricultural sector, supporting rice, sugar, agro-processing and agricultural materials… the BDWP facility intends to serve as an offshore supply base for the oil and gas industry and as a multi-purpose terminal to service agricultural import/export, containerised and specialised cargo including aggregates for construction purposes. The BDWP aims to enable provisioning of operators and vendors in territorial waters of both Guyana and Suriname," CGX added.

GCIE had previously reported last year that there were some minor setbacks with the project due to revisions that were needed to the design of its wharf and trestle in the Berbice River.

GAICO Construction and General Services Inc were selected as the lowest bidder to construct the access trestle and wharf as well as to perform the required dredging operations.

In November 2022, CGX had said that the cargo terminal aspect of the port is expected to commence in mid-2023 and operation of the oil and gas support base in late 2023, subject to construction schedules and supply chains.

The deepwater harbour project is being built on 30 acres of land adjacent to and north of Crab Island on the eastern bank of the Berbice River. It was reported that 10 acres of the plot has been set aside as a living laboratory for the study of mangrove habitats in coexistence with commercial port operations.

Previously, the Guyana Government had given CGX up to September 2022 month-end to submit a plan on how it intends to move forward with the port facility. Subsequently in October of that year, Natural Resources Minister Vickram Bharrat told this newspaper that he was slated to meet with CGX representatives to intensify discussions on fast-tracking works on the project. The CGX deepwater harbour project has been in the works since 2010.

GCIE has been engaged in civil works related to the construction of the US$130 million Berbice Deep Water Port, which intends to serve as an offshore supply base for the oil and gas industry, and as a multi-purpose terminal cargo handling base to service agricultural import/export, containerised and specialised cargo. (G3)

Shell, Chevron and Petrobras weigh Guyana oil-auction bids

GUYANA'S coming auction of offshore oil exploration blocks has lured at least 10 companies including Shell, Petrobras and Chevron, to consider the decade's hottest oil region, people close to the matter said.

The South American country is offering 14 offshore blocks in an attempt to speed economic development and reduce an ExxonMobil-led consortium's dominance of its oil sector. Winning bidders are expected to be picked next month.

Guyana's Vice-President Bharrat Jagdeo is set to speak at the CERAWeek energy conference in Houston on Monday to drum up support for the country's first competitive bidding round.

"We see this as big, transformative for our people. We are in a mad rush to get this done before net-zero comes," he said, referring to the target to slash fossil fuel use by 2050.

He plans to meet with U.S. government officials, international and state-run oil firms while in Houston.

Companies interested in the April round have paid for seismic data to evaluate the blocks and decide whether to submit offers, according to the government. They include six big international producers, Energy Minister Vickram Bharrat has said, without identifying the companies.

None of the companies have decided on bids as they wait for the government to release contract terms, the people familiar with the matter said.

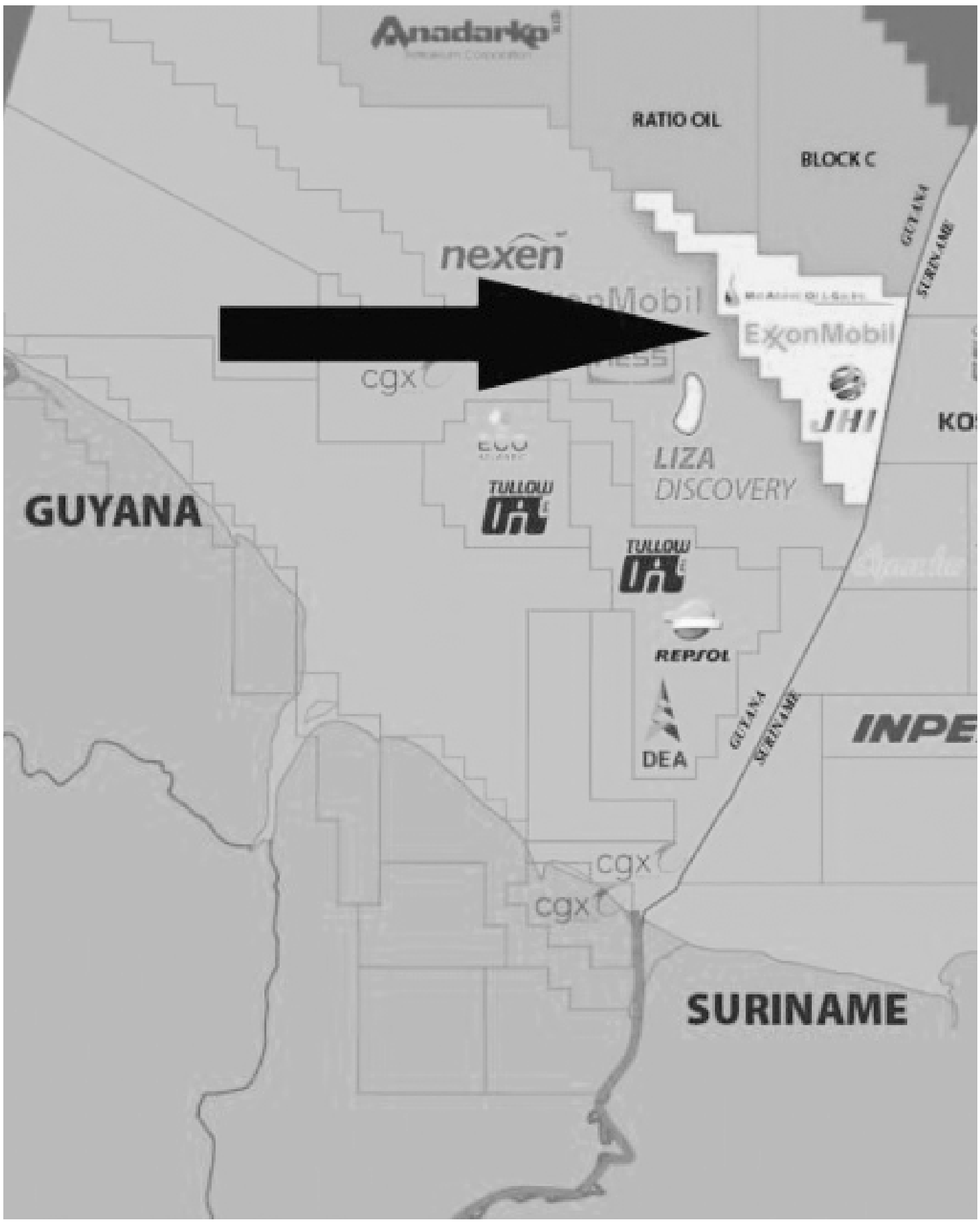
Guyana estimates that it has up to 25 billion barrels of oil and gas in place off its coast. A consortium that includes Exxon Mobil (XOM.N), Hess (HES.N) and CNOOC (0883.HK) operates the country's most important area, the 6.6-million-acre (26,800 sq km) Stabroek block, with more than 30 discoveries to date.

Exxon, QatarEnergy, Shell PLC (SHEL.L), Chevron Corp (CVX.N) and Petrobras (PETR4.SA) are among the oil giants that have paid $20,000 for the geologic information available on the 11 shallow-water and three deep-water blocks, sources familiar with the matter said.

Chevron's main interest is to gain access to Guyana's geological data, three of the sources said, noting that the company has blocks in neighbouring Suriname and Venezuela.

Exxon and QatarEnergy have said that they are waiting for the full contract terms to consider a bid. Shell said it is evaluating the offshore lease sale to determine a possible participation. Chevron and Petrobras did not respond to requests for comment.

Guyana also has begun direct negotiations on the 14 blocks and other areas with governments that have state-controlled oil companies. Guyana also may reclaim up to 20 per cent of Exxon's biggest block and reoffer it in the future.



Map showing the available blokcs up for auction off Guyana

The Guyanese government expects firms such as QatarEnergy to both bid on the April auction and engage in direct negotiations, Jagdeo told Reuters last month.

Guyana plans to issue a new Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) model for leasing offshore blocks by the end of this month, several weeks late. A draft proposal that would go through a two-week public consultation earlier missed its February 13 release. The auction is set for April 14.

The proposed rules will nearly double the government's take from oil production to 27.5 per cent of royalties and profit oil, plus a new 10 per cent corporate tax, compared to Exxon's main contract.

The new agreement also will require producers to provide more information to Guyana, the vice- president said.

"We believe it is asymmetric now, and a bit in favour of the companies," Jagdeo said. "We want more information to come from the oil and gas companies."

The new agreement will request details of the production costs that companies deduct before splitting oil revenue with the country, he said. The Exxon group can now use 75% of the oil production to offset a variety of costs, including construction of its new Guyana headquarters.

The oil model also will set stricter terms for tendering and procurement, covering everything from production vessels to drilling suppliers. However, the terms will not affect Exxon's Stabroek block.

"We are not renegotiating Stabroek," Jagdeo said. "We don't want to lose momentum."

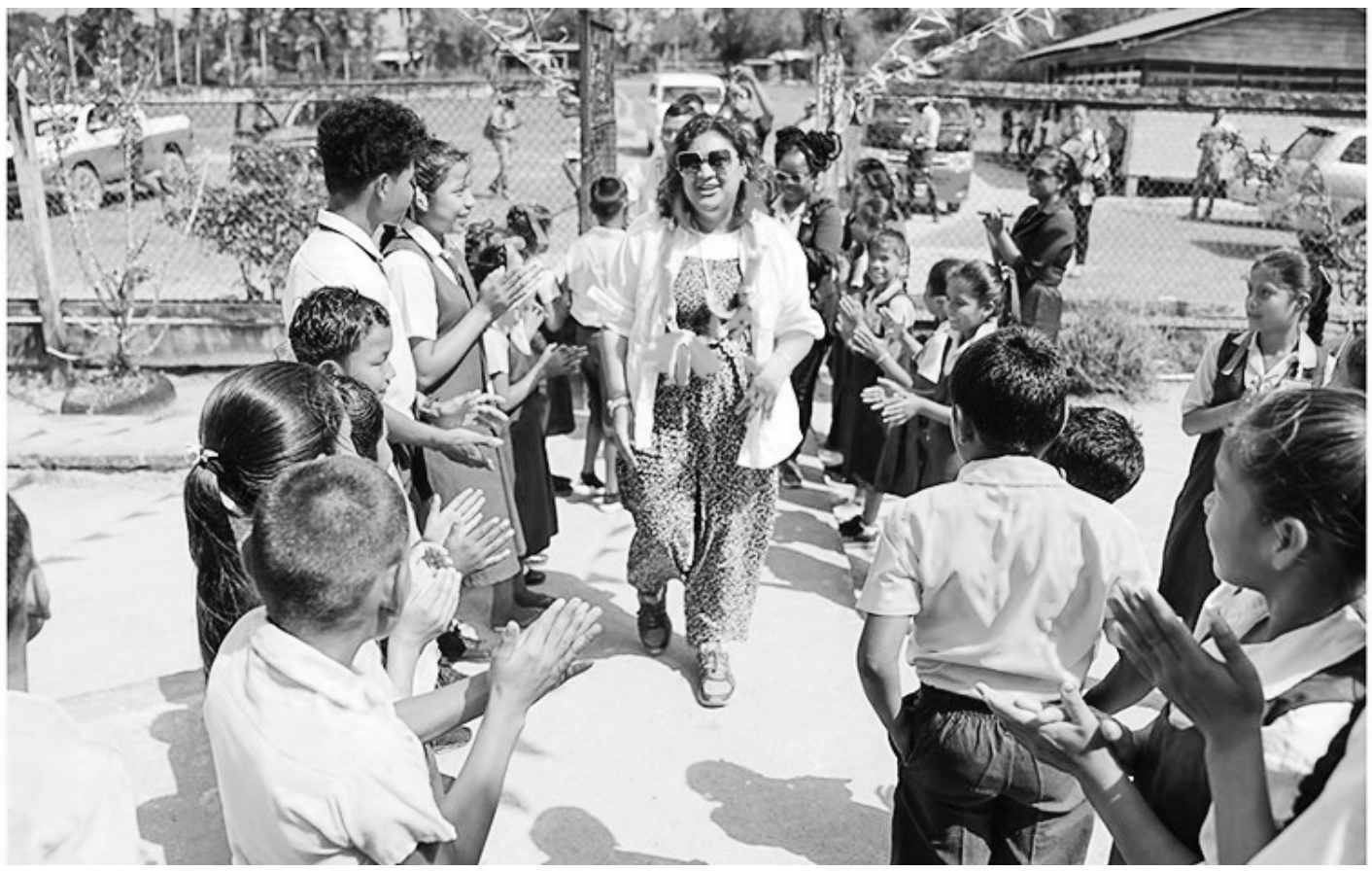
Schools with laboratories, teachers' quarters for Region One

IN keeping with the Ministry of Education's focus on improving access to education all across the country, learners in the Barima-Waini region (Region One) will benefit from three new schools.

According to a release from the MoE, these schools will be constructed in Huradiah in the Moruca subdistrict, Waramuri and Kwebanna.

Following a consultation with residents of Huradiah, a new primary school will be built in the community which will cater for 250 pupils.

"To receive an education, pupils in the village travel across the Moruca river to attend the Santa Rosa Primary School, which is currently overcrowded. Some ten acres of land were made available for the construction of the school. Pupils from the villages of Huradiah, Cabrora, Acquero and Rincon will benefit from this new school.



Minister of Education, Priya Manickchand, during her visit to Barima-Waini region

"Meanwhile, a new secondary school will be built at Waramuri. The modern secondary school will house 400 students. The school will be equipped with Physics, Chemistry and Biology laboratories along with Information Technology, Home Economics and Industrial Technology laboratories, a staff room, an auditorium and teachers' quarters to house 10 teachers and will be solar powered," the release said.

Additionally, students from Waramuri and Haimacabra are expected to benefit from the construction of this school.

Similarly, a modern secondary school, which will cater to 500 students, will be constructed in Kwebanna. Like the school at Waramuri, this complex will be equipped with modern amenities.

"In addition to catering for 500 students in the classrooms, a dormitory will be built to house 250 children. It also comes equipped with teachers' quarters which will house 30 teachers.

"The school will serve the villages of Kwebanna, Santa Cruz, Waikerebi, Chinese Landing, Kokerite, Kariako, Warapoka, Assakata, Unity Grant. The primary school at Kewbanna is currently being extended to comfortably accommodate the school's increasing population," the release said.

Meanwhile, Minister of Education, Priya Manickchand, while addressing residents, said that the new secondary school at Kwebanna will help the Ministry to close the "primary tops" at Assakata, Warapoka, Santa Cruz, St Bedes, Kokerite, Kariako and Chinese landing.

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Diaspora Unit to focus on diaspora diplomacy, investments

EXECUTIVE Director of the Diaspora and Remigration Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rosalinda Rasul, has lauded the performance of the entity in 2022, notwithstanding the challenges.

Addressing members of the Guyanese Canadian for Unity (GCU) and invitees during the association's first anniversary celebrations, held virtually on Wednesday night, Rasul told the gathering that "we were able to identify what we can do to improve the efficiency of not just the unit, but also in the way other agencies for the diaspora work to help deliver quality service."

Rasul, who was also part of the launching of the GCU last year, pointed out that the unit had a very good year in terms of engagement with the diaspora, which included investment initiatives, training and projects which totalled over 1,000 and they are working to quantify those which can be quantified in terms of cost to the country.

"We have had projects that have ranged in the vicinity of five million Canadian dollars, some of them one hundred and fifty million US dollars and we are working to quantify them and also accounting for the number of Guyanese that have been involved in these investments in Guyana."

According to Rasul, "we have had persons in the USA who have actually opened training schools in high quality welding and fabricating and we are very excited about that. Interestingly, we've got quite a lot of investments coming out of Canada and as Guyanese Canadians you should be very proud of that"

Rasul referred to Paul Diaram, who specialises in road construction in Canada but is back in Guyana lending his expertise in a similar field. She pointed out that he has been doing an amazing job since establishing base in his homeland.

Rasul disclosed that her unit is currently doing an analysis of the remigration patterns over the last decade, "so that will be quite an interesting thing to see what the conclusions are with that study in terms of assessment.

"For last year, we have received a lot of applications from people across the globe who are interested in working in Guyana and of course those who are rendering their services on a pro bono basis, whether through volunteerism or working on a short-term stint in various agencies that would require their skills."

For 2023, Rasul said, "we are going to enhance an initiative we started late last year, which is working with our agencies here in Guyana, for training in the area of customer service and delivery to our diaspora that will benefit the public at large. We have partnered with some public sector entities as well as some members of the diaspora who are quite keen on what we are doing in the area of training."

Head of the Diaspora Unit, Rosalinda Rasul

According to the Diaspora Unit head, "we want to focus strategically on the diaspora rather than to have a broad objective. We have actually narrow them down to some very key areas that we are going to focus on – The Diaspora Diplomacy and Enhancing Direct Diaspora Investments."

She pointed out that the diaspora is well positioned in lots of sectors and able to influence and shape ideas and so forth; "we want to enhance that even more, utilise our diaspora when it comes to diplomacy, and pushing lots of projects out. For example, we still have our border issues before the ICJ and our diaspora has been very critical in bringing that awareness and that has been very helpful thing for us here in Guyana."

On the area of Enhancing Direct Diaspora Investments, Rasul disclosed that her agency has been painstakingly going through the 2023 Budget Speech, presented by Minister of Finance, Dr Ashni Singh and also the presentations from the other ministers.

Rasul also pointed out that in 2023, "we are also going to reach out to the younger generation, young people of Guyanese heritage in Canada, USA, UK and other parts of the world, because the youths have massive potential to contribute to Guyana's development, so we want to get them on board."

Guyana's Consul General (ag) to Toronto, Grace Joseph, who was also present, congratulated the GCU on its first anniversary, pointing out that the Consulate is happy to support the initiative of the group and looks forward to continued collaboration to foster ties among the Guyanese community in Toronto, Canada.

Joseph commended the GCU for focusing on heritage preservation of the Guyanese Canadian community for Guyanese in Canada to interact and to share the experience of being part of the Guyanese Canadian community in Toronto and it also provides its members the opportunity to give back to Guyana.

GCU President, Janet Naidu, who chaired the proceedings, pointed to the fact that the association, in its second year, is developing initiatives gradually and hope others will join in these initiatives.

"I just want to share that even though we have left the shores of our birth country, as Guyanese Canadians, we continue to come together as a community.

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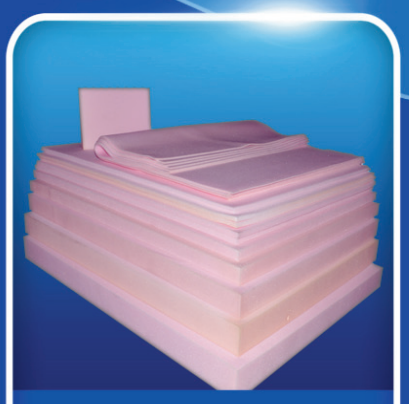
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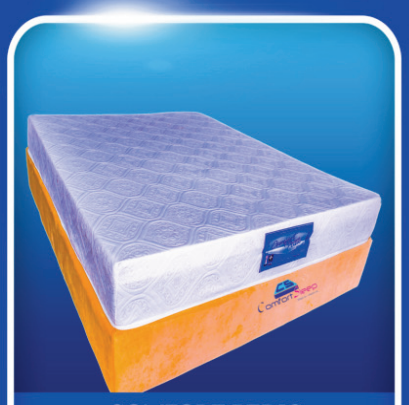
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Updated petroleum bill coming

The new petroleum production bill to update and modernize Guyana's existing legislation will be made public shortly. This is according to Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs Anil Nandlall S.C. who made this known during last Tuesday's edition of his weekly show, Issues in the News.

Guyana has a Petroleum Exploration and Production Act which was enacted in the 1980s.

Nandlall explained that the Petroleum Act was enacted when the country was not a petroleum producer and since Guyana has moved successfully into that sector, the current piece of legislation has become outmoded and cannot be a proper regulatory framework for the current sector.

"We have recognised that a long time ago, and we are working on a brand-new bill that will take into account and will address the modern realities of Guyana as an oil and gas producer. So, that is in the pipeline and that will be made public shortly," he said.

Additionally, Nandlall related that there are some other related legislations that the government is working on as it relates to the oil and gas sector.

"We have acquired under our belt, two years of experience as an oil and gas producer, operator, and exporter and I believe now we are at a particular vantage point where we can now review our experience and start to work on modernizing and making adjustments to the local content law," the Attorney-General said.

Nandlall noted that Guyana has now had the Local Content Act enacted for some two years and said that as more experience is gained, it will be subject to reviews.

The Attorney-General committed to the continual review of the legislation and ensuring that lessons learned in the sector are taken on board so that they could play a role in the updating and modernizing of the legislation.

In addition to Nandlall's disclosure in the petroleum legislation, a recently published Ministry of Natural Resources brief, the Petroleum (Production) Act Petroleum (Exploration and Production, E&P) Act was listed among four legislations that were identified for review and enhancement.

It was stated that the Government seeks to modernize its legal and regulatory framework as it relates to the petroleum sector, to address issues such as oil revenue management, licensing, Production Sharing Agreement models, local content, and Health, Safety,

AG Anil Nandlall

Environmental, and Security (HSES) management.

According to the ministry's brief, the result would be maximizing the economic benefits to the country, improving management of the technical, environmental, social, and financial risks linked to the sector and building the capacity to engage effectively with investors.

The other legislations to be reviewed and enhanced include the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission Act, the Mining Act, and the Environmental Protection Act Occupational Safety and Health Act. Also mentioned were the Upstream Legal Requirements for Petroleum and a Model Production Sharing Agreement.

Former Finance Minister, Winston Jordan last year warned that "Accelerated production in the absence of modernized laws and the strengthening of institutions is what I would consider a fatal flaw in the management of the sector. I see why they want more oil production because of high prices and to monetize the resource quickly…"

In December 2020, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) released a brief pointing out the glaring loopholes in Guyana's legislative framework which essentially weakens the shield of protection that is needed for the oil sector. According to the Bank, Guyana's Petroleum Exploration and Production Act and the Petroleum Commission Bill, in their current state, do not contain any clauses that guarantee the independence of any regulator that is appointed for the sector nor do they ensure adherence to industry norms.

Defence Diplomacy key in foreign policy

Guyana President Dr Irfaan Ali said that the Government is working on promoting defence diplomacy as a key feature in Guyana's foreign policy.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, who addressed newly promoted ranks of the Guyana Defence Force (GDF), at State House today, explained that as Guyana continues to develop, new strategies will be pursued.

He called defence diplomacy, one of the "most critical links between our foreign policy, our defence mechanism and our development strategy".

"We are now going to embark on having defence diplomacy as a key feature of our foreign policy and a key feature of our national architecture."

Another important strategy the Government is pursuing in its development agenda is to prepare members of the GDF for continued contribution to the development of the country.

He posited that it is the training and experience of the GDF that will be converted into an "additional knowledge set" to position the force to produce men and women to be a part of the country's defence diplomacy.

"So, as you embark on this journey, know that we are going to call upon you to contribute in a more significant way."

President Ali also thanked the Chief of Staff, Brigadier Godfrey Bess for his "very strong commitment" over the last two years in transforming the GDF and integrating it into the country's development plan.

This, the President said, has helped to bolster and improve the standing of the military in Guyana.

Dr Irfaan Ali speaking to members of the Guyana Defence Force

"There is greater respect. There is greater honour shown to military officers, because you're delivering a lot more positive development and contributions in communities themselves, and this is not going unnoticed."

Guyana's increasing international presence and partnerships, he explained, gives the GDF the opportunity to "shine" and stand out.

"There are many regional institutions that are asking me for officers by name, because of courses you would have attended and the way you conducted yourself and the way you presented yourself."

The Head of State implored the ranks not to take the massive exposure and training opportunities that the GDF, and by extension the Government, is providing, for granted. "Stay true to your oath of office. Stay true to professionalism. Stay true to the rule of law. Stay true to democracy and trust me, once you stay true to those principles, nothing can ever block you and your future from being better."

Guyana building world-class regulatory environment

THE government's intention is to create a world-class regulatory environment which would be consistent with the highest industry standards and encouraging for investments, Vice-President Dr Bharrat Jagdeo said during a CERAWeek 2023 discussion on Monday.

"We want to emerge as a predictable environment where our regulations dictate the highest industry standards, but they don't become a humbug to the development of the industry. And, on the fiscal side, we want a lot of incentives remaining with people so that they can invest in Guyana so that we remain attractive, but at the same time we want a greater take for the country and the people of the country," Jagdeo said.

Part of this process is the creation of a model Production Sharing Agreement (PSA), which would be used to guide future deals with investors.

This is being done at a time when Guyana is preparing to auction 14 oil blocks. The country is among 65 countries that will be launching auctions of oil blocks, and as such the government worked along with international consultant, IHS Markit Consulting, to offer the best terms that will see the country remaining competitive while also getting a fair deal.

"These are key fiscal conditions. We know already funds are scarce [for oil-and-gas exploration], largely because of net zero targets. It is more and more difficult to finance the oil-and-gas sector. IHS Markit assured us at this level, although they [the conditions] may seem high to some people, that we will remain very competitive," Dr. Jagdeo had said.

He added too: "Some will believe we're taking too much; others will complain we should have taken everything under the sun. We opted for a simple formula with fixed royalties. Some countries have variable royalty depending on internal rate of return; we did not go with that complex system. We opted for a simple system which can be understood by everyone. The fixed royalty protects against when oil prices drop."

The new fiscal terms and other conditions will not be applicable to existing contracts. Outside of the fiscal terms, there will also be other ways in which the government will be moving forward with a stronger PSA to derive lucrative benefits from the oil-and- gas sector.

"We're working on a model PSA and also a new legislation to update the one from 1986. So, it is not fit for purpose today and we want to ensure that even before the bid round is completed, that the potential bidders would see what the new PSA looks like," Jagdeo said on Monday.

VP Bharrat Jagdeo

The Vice-President said that the government believes in stability and predictability but never a capricious government. It was reported recently that a new petroleum production bill to update and modernise Guyana's existing legislation in the sector is currently in the pipeline and will be made public shortly.

This was according to Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs Anil Nandlall S.C., during last Tuesday's edition of his weekly show, Issues in the News. During the live broadcast, he said that while Guyana has a Petroleum Exploration and Production Act, which was enacted in the 1980s, the government is working on a new petroleum production bill.

The previous act, Nandlall said, was enacted when the country was not a petroleum producer and since Guyana has moved successfully into that sector, the current piece of legislation has become outmoded and cannot be a proper regulatory framework for the current sector.

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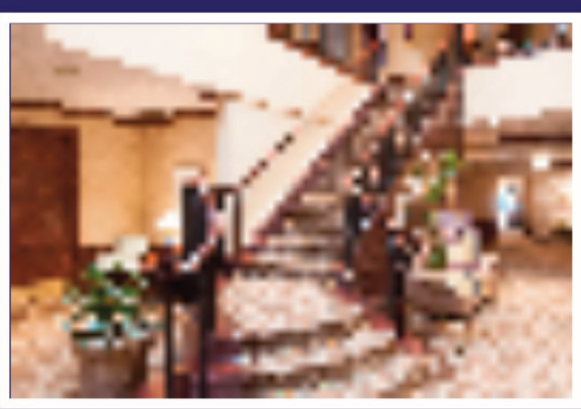

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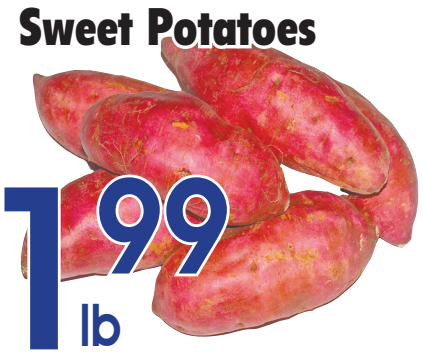

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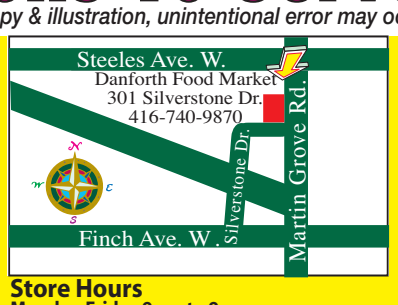

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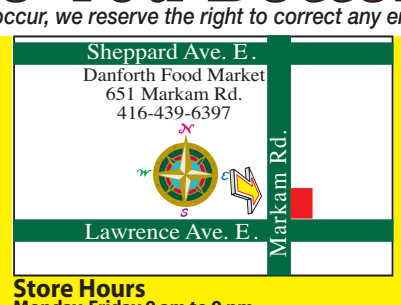

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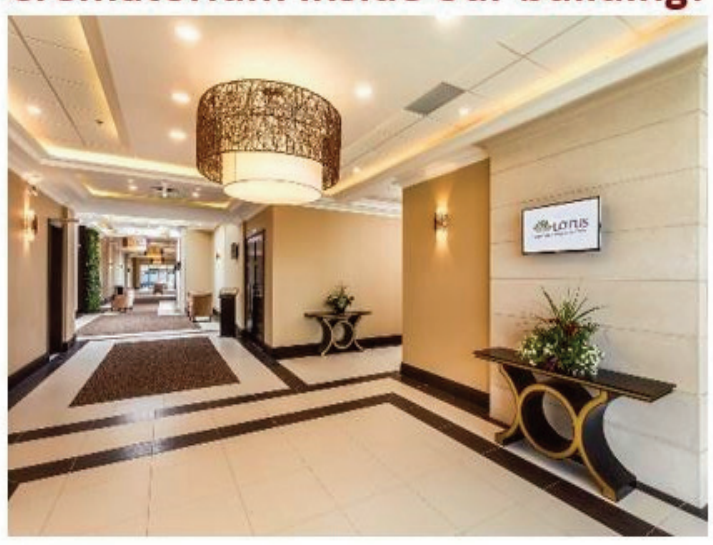

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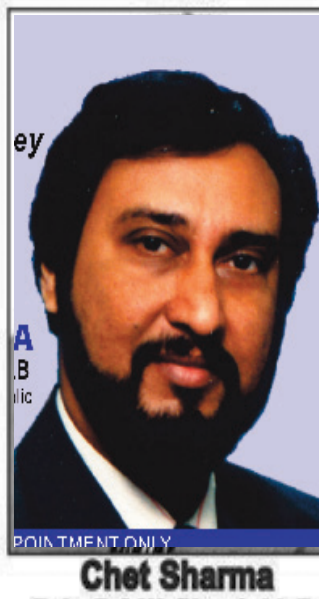

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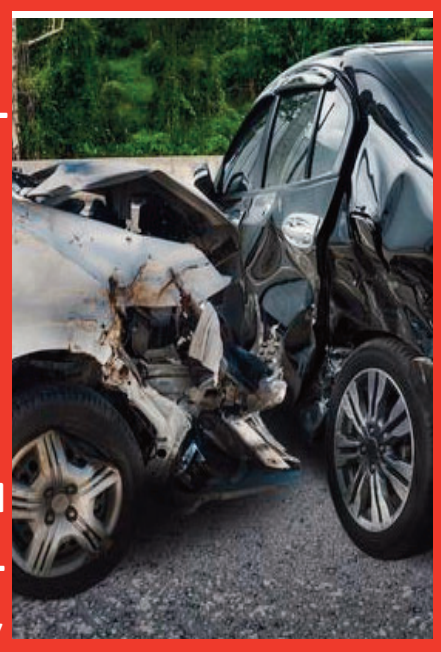

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Guyana secures over US$220M in financing from IDB

GUYANA, on Monday, signed three loan agreements with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to access over US$220 million in financing for enhancements along the East Bank Demerara (EBD) Highway, strengthening of the healthcare sector and national quality infrastructure (NQI).

The agreements were signed in Trinidad and Tobago on the sidelines of the IDB Group's XI Consultation of Caribbean Governors being held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

Senior Minister with responsibility for Finance, Dr. Ashni Singh signed the agreement on behalf of Guyana, while IDB President, Ilan Goldfajn, signed on behalf of the lending institution.

Making brief remarks at the signing, Goldfajn related the bank's pleasure to be entering the agreements that will contribute to massive development in Guyana.

"These loans are in the areas that are priority areas. Guyana is growing and we are very lucky to be part of this growth," Goldfajn said.

Dr. Singh, in his remarks, thanked the IDB for its strong support to Guyana's development effort.

"The IDB has been a reliable and dependable development partner to Guyana over the long term. The strength of this partnership is evidenced not least in the three agreements we are going to be signing today, supporting critical investment in three areas that go to the core of Guyana's government's development agenda," Dr. Singh said.

He added: "These are three extremely important operations and we want to thank the IDB for your support and we look forward to continued and strong support in the months and years ahead."

Senior Minister with Responsibility for Finance, Dr. Ashni Singh signing one of the loan agreements

The first individual loan contract is for financing under the "Health Care Network Strengthening" in Guyana, where the bank will finance up to US$160 million through the Conditional Credit Line Investment Project (CCLIP) and up to US$97 million in the first individual operation with resources from its ordinary capital.

The objective of this programme is to improve the health of the Guyanese population through increased access, quality and efficiency of health services.

This investment will support the expansion of the capacity of seven hospitals across coastland and interior communities, extend coverage of diagnostic exams and medical consultations, advance medical services, and increase access to a more efficient public health system.

This project is expected to benefit a significant portion of Guyana's population including the Indigenous communities, with interventions in all 10 of the country's regions.

"This investment is in the public healthcare system, in particular the rehabilitation and or expansion and or establishment of new hospitals in seven different areas including in remote areas in Guyana, and in particular the deploying Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) for telemedicine solutions which is an excellent innovation, will completely transform the healthcare enjoyed by the remote population in Guyana," Dr. Singh related.

The second loan contract is for the "Programme to Support Climate Resilient Road Infrastructure Development", which will advance Guyana's safe, efficient and climate resilient road and associated infrastructure.

Regarding this loan, the bank will finance up to US$117 million with resources from its ordinary capital.

The programme's specific objectives are to improve road service quality and utility service, along the East Bank Demerara corridor through road and corresponding utility infrastructure improvements.

The EBD corridor is extremely critical given increased economic activities and its connectivity to the Cheddi Jagan International Airport, the Soesdyke to Linden Highway and future development of Silica City, an initiative of President, Dr. Irfaan Ali.

"This is for transportation infrastructure which is absolutely critical. In particular, this project will support the rehabilitation of the East Bank Demerara Highway which is a major artery in Guyana. Given the rapid growth that is taking place in Guyana, it is a major roadways that is already severely congested," Dr. Singh said.

The third loan contract is for the reformulation and additional financing to the programme entitled, "Enhancing the National Quality Infrastructure for Competitiveness."

The objective of the additional financing is to support economic competitiveness, with a specific objective to support the adoption of quality standard among Guyanese micro, small and medium enterprises.

The bank will provide up to US$8 million through additional financing with resources from its ordinary capital. A major investment that will be made under this loan is the establishment of a new and modern world class state-of-the-art laboratory to be operated by the Guyana National Bureau of Standard.

"That lab is an absolutely critical role in standards and certification which has taken on new and enhanced importance given the changes taking place in the Guyanese economy. It's important for us to be compliant with international standards and certified with international standards in all areas that we operate," Dr. Singh said.

Shah Rukh Khan: one of the world's biggest stars

Fans hide in make-up room for 8 hours to meet SRK

Shah Rukh Khan is a global star. He has fans everywhere. The actor just delivered the biggest hit and is now gearing up for his next two films which are Dunki and Jawan. A couple of days ago, it was reported that two fans of Shah Rukh Khan were arrested for trespassing at his home, Mannat which is in Mumbai. It was said that they wanted to meet Shah Rukh Khan and were nabbed by the security guards after which they were arrested by the Police. And now, the Mumbai police have shared new details.

Shah Rukh Khan fans who were arrested stayed in Mannat for 8 hours

The trespassing report at Shah Rukh Khan's home immediately grabbed headlines in Entertainment News. And now, the latest update on the same has also made it to the news.

The Mumbai Police said in a statement that the two men sneaked into the Pathaan actor's bungalow in the wee hours.

They hid in the make-up room of Shah Rukh Khan which is situated on the third floor. They waited inside the make-up room to meet Shah Rukh.

ARIES (March 21 - April 20): Jupiter in your sign is a wonderful influence all by itself but as it joins forces with values planet Venus today it will seem as if all your birthdays have come along at the same time. One particular relationship will bring a great deal of joy.

TAURUS (April 21 - May 21): You have been a bit hesitant to open up emotionally in recent weeks but as Venus, your ruling planet, aligns with Jupiter today that should no longer be such a problem. Let friends and loved ones know exactly how you feel, and why.

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21): If you put your heart and soul into what you are doing today the end result is sure to be magnificent. The fact that you enjoy your work so much means it won't be a chore but a work of art. Invest everything you do with love.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23): If someone in a position of authority asks you for a favor of some kind today you should go out of your way to do it for them. They will be so impressed by your can-do attitude that you may soon find yourself in a position of authority too.

LEO (July 24 - Aug. 23): Cosmic activity in the most adventurous area of your chart means that any journeys you undertake between now and the weekend will go well and bring a great deal of joy. If you have been thinking of taking a vacation why not book it today?

VIRGO (Aug. 24 - Sept. 23): Listen to what your inner voice tells you today and ignore those who say you need to lower your sights. If anything you have not been ambitious enough in recent weeks, so throw caution to the wind and don't worry about the cost, it's not important.

LIBRA (Sept. 24 - Oct. 23): Give partners and loved ones room to be themselves today and don't worry if they choose to wander off on their own for an hour or two. If you try to restrict their freedom not only will you fail but you may encourage them to be more rebellious.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24 - Nov. 22): No matter how annoying certain people may be today you must not let them get under your skin. If you relax and take nothing too seriously you may find that you no longer care what they say or do, and your mood will improve accordingly.

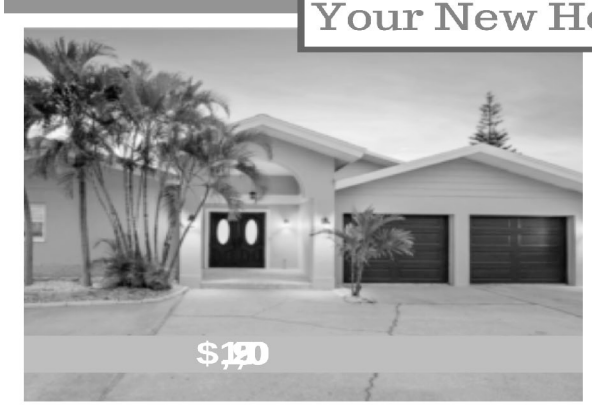
SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 23 - Dec. 21): Jupiter, your ruler, links with Venus today in the most dynamic area of your chart, so get out into the world and enjoy what it has to offer, and make sure you offer it something good in return. If you're not loving and laughing then you're doing it wrong.

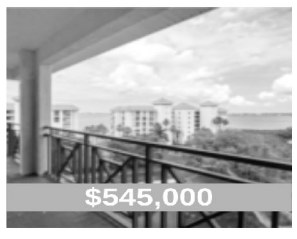
CAPRICORN (Dec. 22 - Jan. 20): Stop harking back to the past and what might have been and focus on making the future a much better place. The time has come to draw a line under what went before and act as if everything behind that line no longer exists.

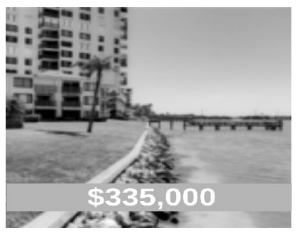
AQUARIUS (Jan. 21 - Feb. 19): If there is a message you need to get across to the world then get out your soapbox and make your pitch. Your passion is sure to inspire but keep it light and try not to sound too apocalyptic as that might turn some people off.

PISCES (Feb. 20 - Mar. 20): An unexpected windfall will cheer you up no end between now and the weekend but watch out for those who want to help you spend it or you could end up with precious little left for yourself. Better still, don't spend it at all – save it instead.

Your New Home Awaits







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PAHO urges Caribbean countries to tackle main driver of NCDs

Warning labels could help prevent obesity in the Caribbean, says PAHO

THE Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) is urging countries to tackle the main driver of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the Americas, including the Caribbean.

On World Obesity Day last Saturday, PAHO said front-of-package warning labels, restrictions on the marketing of processed and ultra-processed products high in fats, sugars and salt, and taxes on unhealthy food and beverages are among the measures being promoted to tackle the growing problem of obesity in the region of the Americas.

According to PAHO, obesity is one of the main risk factors for several non-communicable diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, as well as several types of cancer.

In 2021, PAHO said obesity was responsible for 2.8 million deaths from NCDs in the Americas.

PAHO said rates of overweight and obesity have tripled in the region over the past 50 years, adding that these conditions now affect 62.5 per cent of the population, the highest regional prevalence in the world.

Levels of overweight and obesity among children are also on the rise, affecting 33.6 per cent of children and adolescents aged five to 19 years in the Americas, PAHO said.

It said this is primarily due to low levels of breastfeeding, and poor diets that are low in fruits and vegetables and high in ultra-processed food and drink products.

"Noncommunicable diseases are the biggest killer in the Americas, accounting for 80 per cent of all deaths in the Americas, one-third of which are preventable," said Fabio da Silva Gomes, PAHO's regional advisor on nutrition and physical activity.

"Halting the rise in obesity is essential to combat the growing burden of NCDs and improve the health and well-being of everyone in the Americas, including the next generation."

To tackle the growing trend of obesity in the Americas, PAHO said it works with countries on the implementation of proven strategies to prevent and reduce the problem.

These include protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding, which reduces the risk of overweight and obesity by 13 per cent in children; improving nutrition and promoting physical activity in pre-schools and schools; taxes on sugary drinks and the regulation of food marketing; and intersectoral actions through health promotion, surveillance, research and evaluation.

PAHO said it is also working with countries of the Americas in the implementation of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Acceleration Plan to STOP obesity, discussed during the 75th World Health Assembly in 2022.

"The aim of the plan is to accelerate progress towards reducing obesity, with a focus on high-burden countries," PAHO said.

In December 2022, PAHO experts met with representatives from Argentina, Barbados, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago in Brasilia, to start the development of country roadmaps to implement the plan in the Americas.

PAHO said World Obesity Day is celebrated every year on March 4 "to raise awareness of the urgent need to address the global obesity epidemic".

The theme of 2023 is "Changing Perspectives: Let's talk about obesity."

FAO program to help food security

THE Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) have jointly launched the Agrifood Systems Transformation Accelerator (ASTA), a global programme designed to help least developed countries make their agrifood systems more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable by fostering partnerships and generating public-private investments.

The launch took place on Sunday during a bilateral meeting between FAO Director-General, QU Dongyu and his UNIDO counterpart, Gerd Mueller, on the sidelines of the Fifth UN Conference on Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in Doha, Qatar.

ASTA is the first centrepiece of a new collaboration between FAO and UNIDO and helps generate investment in the agrifood system of some of the world's poorest countries, including through development of value chains, market systems, business models and inclusive finance, in order to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

"Addressing the future of agrifood systems requires a holistic view covering many topics, such as the climate crisis, agricultural production, value chain efficiency, inclusion, nutrition, land use and biodiversity, among others. ASTA offers a concrete tool to help countries realise the objective of agrifood systems transformation," Qu said.

"ASTA identifies investment opportunities and helps channel those investments into food value chains. With such efforts, FAO and UNIDO are natural partners. Our expertise and efforts complement each other. I am very proud of our cooperation with FAO," Mueller said.

ASTA's launch comes at a time when our agrifood systems are threatened under the pressure of the climate crisis, ongoing conflicts and war, as well as the protracted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This requires a fresh approach and novel solutions.

ASTA does this in four ways: By breaking down silos through broad-based public-private collaborations; by doing away with the traditional top-down support and placing the beneficiaries in the driving seat; by embodying the ONE UN approach, whereby different UN organisations combine forces to assist countries in more synergistic ways; as well as a shift away from targetting individual SDG indicators.

Such a shift is especially relevant for LDCs, where multiple bottlenecks often hinder urgent change and where integrated solutions based on inter-ministerial and public-private sector collaborations are essential.

Crucially, the programme helps countries move from broad recommendations and strategies to concrete implementation with measurable impacts.

The ASTA approach has been field-tested since 2018 in 15 countries across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, the Pacific and South America. One example where the ASTA model has been successfully tested is in Suriname, where public funding worth $2 million was secured to promote $8 million in private investments to transform its pineapple value chain.

New school, health centre as Region 9 signs $254.5M in contracts

SOME $254.5 million in contracts were signed between several contractors and the Region Nine Regional Democratic Council (RDC) for capital and current projects to advance infrastructural development and transformation in that region.

The projects included the construction of a primary school with nursery classes at Quiko Village, South-Central District, totalling $12.621 million and a health post costing $13.482 million.

For the first time in history a school and health post will be constructed in the village, which will bring tremendous relief and ease the burden of villagers travelling miles to seek health services and to attend school. These projects will benefit the villagers significantly, giving them opportunities that they never had before.

In addition, the Aishalton village Council was awarded a contract for the construction of culverts at Kabanawau Creek, Deep South Rupununi, totalling $9,504,000.

Contracts will be given to village councils to construct combination chairs for the region and other regions in the country. This decision was made after President, Dr Irfaan Ali, during a visit to Region Nine had observed the high quality of combination chairs that were built by the Aishalton Village Council.

Capital projects included contracts for the construction of two-apartment teacher's quarters at Kokshebai Primary in the South Pakaraimas sub-district, construction of staff quarters in Aishalton village, construction of a number of concrete bridges at Caiman Creek, Baby Creek, Parishara Village, Makurpan Werimoor to Rupunau Village, Aishalton Farm Road, Deep South Rupununi and Dove Creek.

The construction of box culverts are scheduled for Jabari Creek, South Pakaraimas, and Yakarinta access road, in the North Rupununi .

The Taushida Primary is scheduled to benefit from $12.833 million in rehabilitation works, while repairs will be done at the Wowetta, Surama and Kaicumbay Primary Schools.

Regional Executive Officer (REO) Karl Singh signs a contract

The perimeter fence of the St Ignatius Secondary School is also expected to be repaired at a cost of $12.965 million. Speaking at the signing, Regional Executive Officer (REO) and Chairman of the Tender Board, Karl Singh, extended congratulations to the various contractors and encouraged them to fulfil their obligations in producing quality work in keeping with the Bill of Quantities and deadlines for completion of the projects .

Singh reminded them that the projects are an important part of boosting the economy of the region and improving the lives of people in the communities.

Opposition wants Dominica to revisit ganja policy

The opposition United Workers Party (UWP) is calling on the Dominica government to revisit the policy to legalize the possession of 28 grams of marijuana and the cultivation of not more than three plants.

In a statement, the party said that while it supports the medicinal cannabis industry, "we stand firm on the premise that our young people must be protected at all costs, and that measures must be put in place to channel their energy into productive areas.

"The UWP further calls on the government of Dominica to establish a National Rehabilitation Centre. Establish well-equipped sporting facilities where the youth can train to participate effectively in local, regional, and international tournaments. Increase the capabilities and capacities of the Island's youth by placing a lot more emphasis on their training in and acquisition of technical and vocational skills."

The party said that it had since 2019 given a "solemn promise that if elected to office, it would in the first one hundred days approve and enact policy framework legislation and regulations to legalize, grow and process marijuana into manufactured health products.

"This would be part of the overall strategy toward economic resilience and would be done under strict regulations to protect our children and youths," it said adding that its recommendation had been ignored by the government that in 2020 enacted the policy to legalize small amounts of drugs.

The party, which boycotted the 2020 general election last December, said that it was always of the opinion that the policy on marijuana "would not be in the interest of the Dominican people since it would just encourage our youths to smoke but not to create entrepreneurial opportunities to enhance their livelihood".

The UWP said that it has always been concerned about the "future and plight of the young people of Dominica who are so frustrated battling unemployment, underemployment, mental problems and many more socio-economic problems as a result of a failing economy.

"Consequently, the youth feel that their only option is to sit on the street corners and indiscriminately smoke marijuana. This constant smoking of weed could permanently harm their mental capacities and could increase social anxiety disorders.

"All people of good conscience in Dominica have a moral obligation to protect our children and young people from exposure to bad decisions made by our leaders in their quest for absolute power, regardless of the trail of broken lives that's left in their wake."

The party said that its approach to this issue remains clear and that "we must prevent indiscriminate use of marijuana in our communities and ensure law enforcement protects society by enforcing the laws and tackling the organized crime that is associated with the drug trade."

"The party also recommends that the government revisits its drug policy by taking a balanced, coherent, and consolidated approach to address the evolving challenges posed."

Ali urges racial harmony as Guyana celebrates Phagwah

President Dr. Irfaan Ali, on Monday, urged nationals to put aside their mistrust and division based on race and work together for a better Guyana.

"As we move forward towards a more inclusive and equitable future in this glorious land of ours, let us not allow the impediments of division, mistrust, mischief, and hatred to derail our country's rapid development," Ali said in a message in observance of Phagwah.

He said that while Phagwah is a Hindu festival, brought here by the Indian indentured immigrants, it now enjoys universal appeal and that Guyanese from all cultural backgrounds join their Hindu brothers and sisters in celebrating the festival.

"Phagwah is observed in Guyana with an eruption of colors and with effusive cheerfulness and merriment. The sprinkling, showering, and smearing of colored powder on other's faces and garments are symbolic of the inclusive character of this lively festival, one in which distinctions based on race, religion, and class are blurred," Ali added.

He said Phagwah reminds Guyana that, "Despite the differences, we are all part of a common human family who inhabit our planet."

"As such, we must continue to promote harmonious relations with each other, mindful that in doing so we will create the conditions that will continually yield a bountiful harvest of benefits to be shared by all. "

Ali said that nature has bestowed Guyana with an abundance of natural resources and that the country is perhaps the most endowed in the Caribbean.

He said the government is developing the resources for the benefit of all Guyanese and that it is pursuing a path of development in which no one will be excluded or left behind.

"Prudent policies are being promulgated to ensure the sustainable exploitation of our natural resources, and to enhance our people's knowledge and skills to allow them to better participate in our burgeoning economy.

"We are nation forged out of a history of struggle. We are not daunted by challenges. We are imbued with a tenacious spirit in overcoming adversity. Through hard work, diligence, and sacrifice, and with the right policies we can each carve out a secure future for ourselves and for future generations. "

President Irfaan Ali said as the country moves forward towards a more inclusive and equitable future, it is imperative that the population should not allow the impediments of division to derail our country's rapid development.

"As we celebrate Phagwah with an outpouring of fervor and joy, love and with kindness in our hearts, may we commit to holding each other hands and moving forward together united and free towards that rewarding future which lies ahead," he added.

Irfaan Ali celebrating phagwa in Guyana last week

In recent years, the discovery of oil and gas has made Guyana one of the richest countries in the region with the government forecasting that the local economy will expand by at least 25 percent per year in the next three to four years.

Finance Minister Dr. Ashni Singh said Guyana's economy registered a growth of 62 percent last year and is forecast to expand by another 25 percent this year.

Grenada lowers electricity costs for citizens

The Grenada government on Tuesday said more than 21,000 low-income households should benefit from lower electricity rates as it implements an EC$10 (One EC dollar=US$0.37 cents) subsidy for the next 12 months.

In a statement, the government said that customers will begin to see the subsidy on their February bills from the Grenada Electricity Services Ltd. (GRENLEC) and that the relief measure forms part of its efforts to ease cost of living expenses for citizens.

"The cost to the government for February is EC$176,140. In addition, low-income households that consume less than 100 kWh per month will not meet the threshold for the payment of the Value Added Tax (VAT) nor the Environmental Levy, resulting in additional savings," the statement said.

It said that all GRENLEC customers who do not qualify for the subsidy will pay VAT at the lower rate of 7.5 per cent instead of the previous rate of 15 per cent.

"This relief will result in significant savings for all categories of GRENLEC customers. The government takes this opportunity to remind the public of the importance of energy efficiency and conservation and reiterates its commitment to reducing the impact of high energy costs on the population," the statement added.

Barbados' Prime Minister Mia Mottley to visit France

Barbados' Prime Minister Mia Mottley is to visit France in a few days for talks with President Emmanuel Macron, a senior government minister has announced.

Foreign Affairs Minister Kerrie Symmonds, who made the announcement in Barbados' Parliament during the debate on the 2023-24 Estimates, said that he will be accompanying her to Paris.

Symmonds said that President Emmanuel Macron has "urged" that he be allowed to form part of a cooperative agreement with Barbados, so that there can be a summit allowing him to use his global reach as a G7 leader to help the Caribbean island advance the Bridgetown Initiative.

The Bridgetown Initiative is a proposal to reform the world of development finance, particularly how rich countries help poor countries cope with and adapt to climate change.

Barbados sets out three key steps in the Bridgetown Initiative. The first involves changing some of the terms around how funding is loaned and repaid. The aim is to stop developing nations from spiraling into a debt crisis when their borrowing is forced up by successive disasters like floods, droughts, and storms.

Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley

"By no stretch of the imagination could we have envisaged that this type of relationship would have been fostered for this country ten years ago," Symmonds told legislators.

Prime Minister Mia Mottley is the first female Prime Minister of Barbados. She is a beloved veteran politician, following in the footsteps of her grandfather, Ernest Deighton Mottley, a real estate broker and the first mayor of Bridgetown. In her historic career thus far, she holds the record for the most dominant political victory in the country's history, securing all thirty seats as leader of the Barbados Labour Party, in addition to winning 72.8 percent of the popular vote – the largest share ever won by a party in a general election. She has spent years championing environmental protection and spearheading food security and reforestation programs on her island home.

JA Tourism Minister: major shift since pandemic

Jamaica's Tourism Minister, Edmund Bartlett, says the industry has undergone a significant transformation in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and that its future success now depends on the ability of its workforce to create innovative and distinctive experiences.

Addressing the inaugural Jamaica Centre of Tourism Innovation's Tourism Career Expo, Bartlett told the more than 400 students that young Jamaicans should consider tourism as a promising career option, emphasizing the importance of rethinking their perspective on the industry.

Bartlett said that the reimagined tourism sector is not only financially rewarding but also thrives on input from individuals with diverse skill sets and backgrounds, ranging from industries directly linked to tourism to those indirectly associated with it.

"We are inviting you to an industry that will give you an opportunity to realize your best self. It will enable you to innovate, to think, to act, and to also convert information, knowledge, and ideas into value added experiences," he told the weekend event hosted by the Tourism Enhancement Fund (TEF) and the Tourism Product Development Company (TPDCo) at the Montego Bay Convention Centre.

Jamaica's Minister of Tourism, Edmund Bartlett.

"When you enter this tourism experience, which we are asking you to join, it is the beginning of a whole new development of yourself and an expansion of your capacity to do and to be," he added.

He said the post-Covid industry requires a diverse range of talents, including those in nuclear science, robotics, and nanotechnology.

He told the audience that the future of work in tourism will significantly transform the sector, as machine intelligence and the internet of things will revolutionize the way basic services are provided.

Bartlet predicted that this transformation would eliminate 70 per cent of informal activities in tourism that pay lower remuneration, paving the way for more skilled and higher-paying job opportunities.

"Because machine intelligence and the internet of things are going to change the way basic services are provided in tourism. You [the youth of Jamaica] are going to be the manipulators of these gadgetries that flow from the internet of things…"

"Then 3-D technology is going to create opportunities for the reproduction of goods in a manner that is impossible for a human being to do. So, what then is the future for you in tourism? It is going to be for you to be the drivers of new experiences," said Edmund Bartlett.

The tourism career expo formed an integral component of the JCTI's public education programme, which aims to provide internationally recognized certification for individuals interested in pursuing a career in tourism.

In addition to certification, the JCTI, which is a department of the TEF, is responsible for raising awareness among Jamaican youth, including high school and college students, about the multitude of opportunities available in the tourism industry.

The main objective of the career expo was to broaden young Jamaicans' understanding of the various job roles in tourism and introduce students to traditional and non-traditional career paths.

Man who killed BBC News presenter wants out of TT Death Row

CONVICTED Trinidadian killer Daniel Agard wants his death sentence vacated and to be removed from death row.

He has applied for an interim declaration that any attempt to carry out the death sentence imposed on him on September 13, 2013, and his continued detention on death row, will be in contravention of the Constitution.

Agard's application also asks for his sentence to be vacated and for him to be removed immediately from the condemned section of the Port of Spain prison.

Agard, 39, was twice convicted of the brutal murders of members of the Cropper family in 2001.

He first went to trial in 2004 when he and another man, Lester Pitman, were convicted and sentenced to hang for the murders of Maggie Lee, BBC News presenter Lynette Lithgow-Pearson and John Cropper on December 11, 2001.

Agard was the great-nephew of John and the late independent senator Angela Cropper. Lee was his great-grandmother and Pearson his great-aunt.

Agard successfully appealed his convictions and a retrial was ordered. He was again convicted and three death sentences were again imposed on him on September 13, 2013, which he appealed and lost in July 2019.

He did not appeal further to the Privy Council.

His application said he has remained on death row since September 2013, a period of nine years, five months and 17 days. In all, he has spent 21 years in prison from the time of his arrest and charge in 2001, and ten years and two months on death row for his two sets of convictions.

His application says he has not contributed to any delay and remains under the sentence of death, which cannot now be lawfully carried out in keeping with the principles set out in the Jamaican death-penalty case of Pratt and Morgan. This principle is that to carry out a death sentence after more than a five-year delay would be cruel and inhuman punishment.

According to the application, in 2019, it should have been clear to the State that the death penalty could not be carried out because of Pratt and Morgan. It took no steps to commute Agard's sentence, so his continued detention in a condemned cell is unconstitutional.

The constitutional claim says: "Prolonged and unjustifiable delay in the carrying out of an execution imposed by a court of competent jurisdiction could have the effect of rendering the execution not being in accordance with the due process of law guaranteed…under the Constitution.

"...A State that wishes to retain capital punishment must accept the responsibility of ensuring that execution follows as swiftly as practicable after sentence, allowing a reasonable time for appeal and consideration of reprieve."

Lynette Lithgow-Pearson: BBC News presenter murdered with mother in Trinidad in 2001

The claim set out a rough timeline for carrying out capital punishment, suggesting 12 months to hear an appeal after conviction and six months for the Privy Council to dispose of it.

In all, the claim suggested disposing of a domestic appeal in two years and for any complaints to international human rights bodies to be made 18 months thereafter.

It also says where there has been a long delay in carrying out a death sentence, which renders it unlawful, then it must be "judicially commuted," and the High Court has the power to impose a substitute sentence in keeping with the principles of sentencing.

"The fundamental reason why execution following the lapse of a prolonged period of time after sentence of death would constitute inhuman punishment is that the condemned man has suffered the agony of mind of facing the prospect of execution over that period."

In his affidavit in support of the application and the claim, Agard said he has been incarcerated for more than half his life and has considered suicide many times. He spoke of the condition of the prison, allegedly being beaten during a prison riot, attacks by other inmates and what he felt when the death sentences were read to him, twice.

"It has haunted me from the time I heard those words to now."

He said he was one of the youngest prisoners on death row and spoke of his incarceration there, where he has his own cell.

"You may be physically alive but you are emotionally dead. Each day on death row, the experiences that you are made to go through saps your very humanity."

He says as a death row inmate, he cannot participate in any prison programmes or advance his education, as incarceration is only supposed to allow the condemned prisoner to prepare to "meet their maker."

"The fear of being executed at the hands of the State is a very real one."

He has also applied for a pardon but says he does not know if his plea has been considered. Agard's claim and application were filed on Monday.

His co-accused, Pitman, successfully challenged his case at appeal and his death sentence was commuted. He was eventually ordered not to be released before he serves a minimum of 40 years in prison.

Sarwan hopes ‘mature’ Hetmyer makes ‘right decisions’ for career

THE Guyana Cricket Board (GCB), on Saturday, announced the Guyana Harpy Eagles squad for the third round of the West Indies four-day Championship against Trinidad and Tobago Red Force at the Brian Lara Cricket Academy from March 15.

One of the excluded names from the squad is batsman Shimron Hetmyer, who is understood to be available for selection.

Hemyer had missed earlier rounds due to his commitments in the United Arab Emirates T20 League, however, after being named in the Berbice squad for the Senior Inter-County four-day squad, he opted out due to what was reported to be “family commitments.” Chairman of the Senior National Selection panel, Ramanaresh Sarwan, has indicated that Hetmyer’s selection to the Guyana Harpy Eagles would hinge on him playing Inter-County cricket.

According to Sarwan, he has spoken to Hetmyer on numerous occasions and would trust that a “mature” Hetmyer would make the necessary choices.

“I have spoken to ‘Hetty’ numerous times before and I think ‘Hetty’ is mature enough and old enough to make the right decisions and he has to know what he wants,” Sarwan stated on Saturday when questioned on Hetmyer’s availability for selection.

The chairman indicated that it is the policy of the Guyana Cricket Board that for players to be eligible for national duties they must play inter-county cricket, with the potential exceptions being West Indies duties or injury.

Hetmyer last represented Guyana at the Super50 in November 2022, prior to which he played in the Inter-County Super50.

“It is difficult to answer for ‘Hetty’, the board has a policy that once you play inter-county, you become eligible for selection to Guyana. In terms of if ‘Hetty’ wants to play local cricket that is totally up to him. I don’t believe as a selector I can force him to do that,” the former West Indies captain added.

Chairman of Senior Selectors, Ramnaresh Sarwan

Motie nominated for ICC Player of the Month

Rookie West Indies left-arm spinner Gudakesh Motie is one of three players nominated for the International Cricket Council men’s Player-of-the-Month for February.

The 27-year-old was named alongside England batsman Harry Brook and veteran India all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja, in the nominations announced Tuesday by cricket’s world governing body.

In only his third Test last month, Motie snatched a record 13 for 99 to spin West Indies to an innings and four-run victory over Zimbabwe in the second and final Test in Bulawayo.

Motie’s performance earned the visitors a 1-0 series win following a draw in the opening Test.

The Guyanese’s figures were the best by a West Indies spinner in Tests – surpassing the legendary likes of Sonny Ramadhin, Alf Valentine, and Lance Gibbs.

Motie finished the two-Test series with 19 wickets to earn the Player-of-the-Series award and his first ever ICC Player-of-the-Month nomination.

Motie, who made his Test debut last June against Bangladesh, has picked up 19 wickets in his career at an outstanding average of 15.89.

He has taken 136 wickets from 37 first class matches at 20.41 apiece.

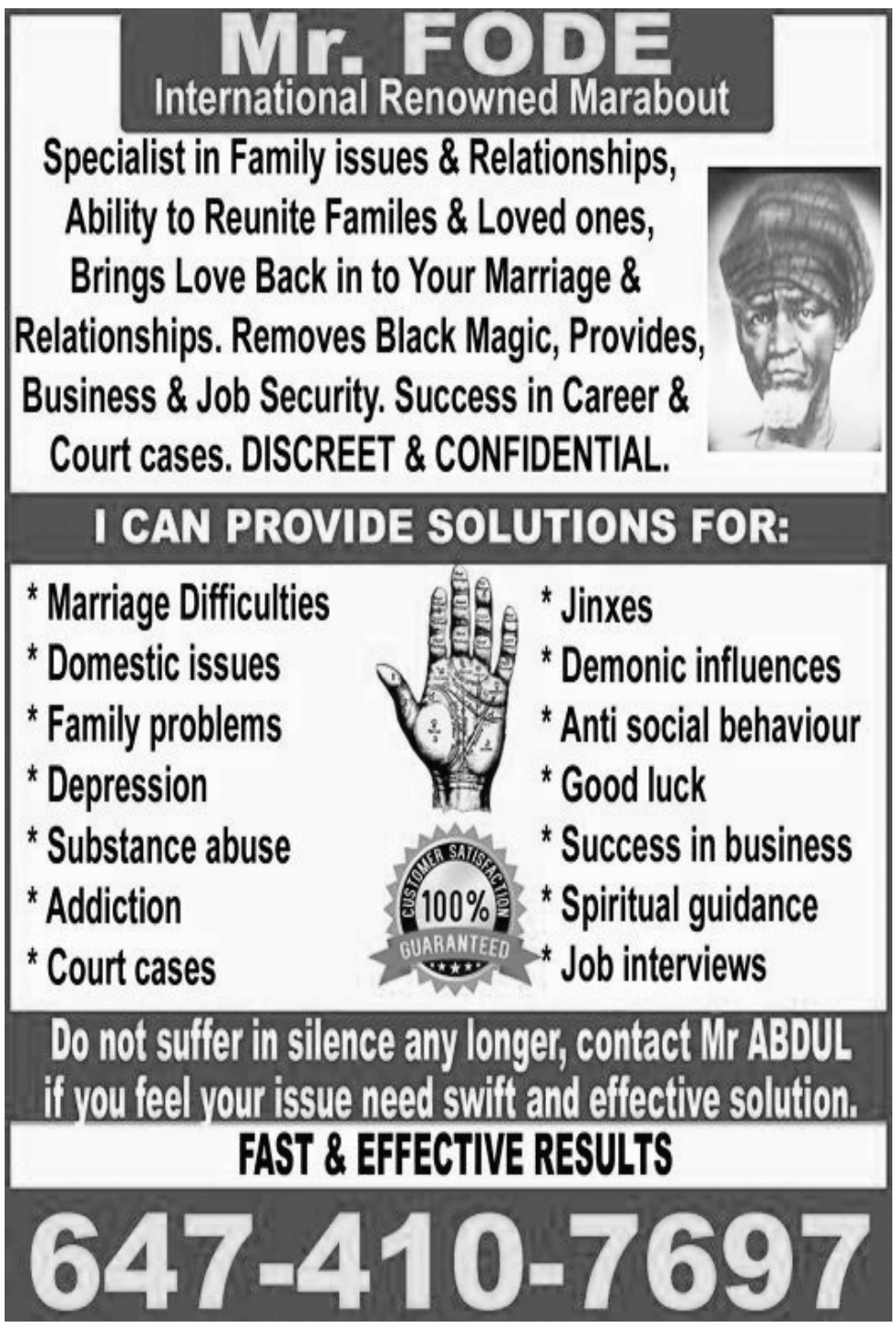
Brook, meanwhile, scored heavily in England’s recent Test series in New Zealand, gathering 329 runs at an average of 82, including a career-best 186 and two half-centuries.

The 24-year-old has played only six Tests.

Jadeja, 34, shone in the three-match series against Australia, picking up 21 wickets at an astonishing 13.9 runs apiece as the hosts claimed a 2-1 series win.

A left-arm spinner, Jadeja has taken 263 wickets from 63 Tests.

Australian Ashleigh Gardner, England’s Nat Sciver-Brunt and South African Laura Wolvaardt are the three players nominated for the women’s Player-of-the-Month award.



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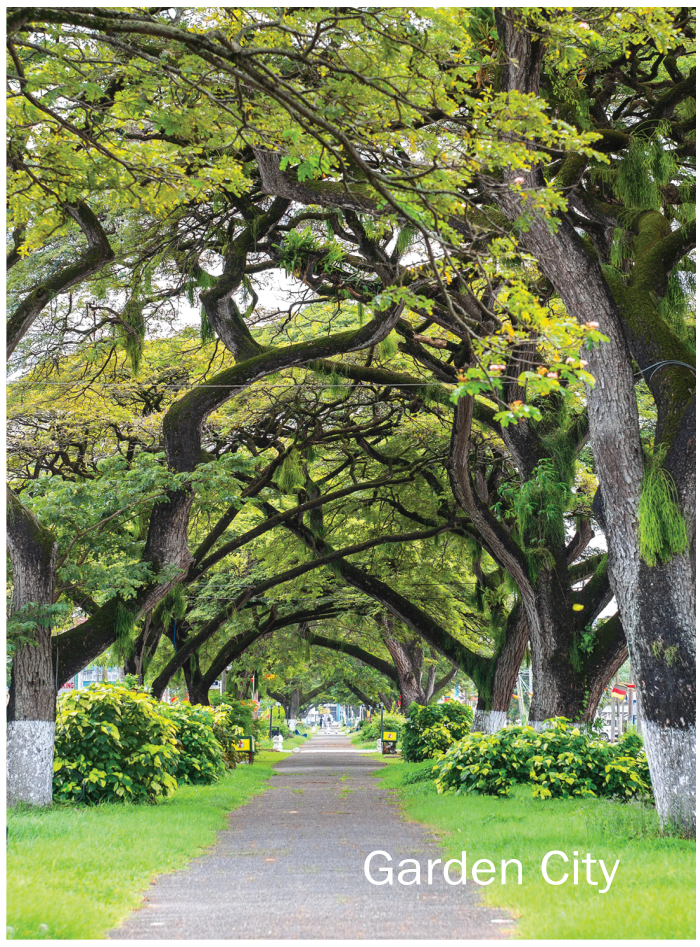

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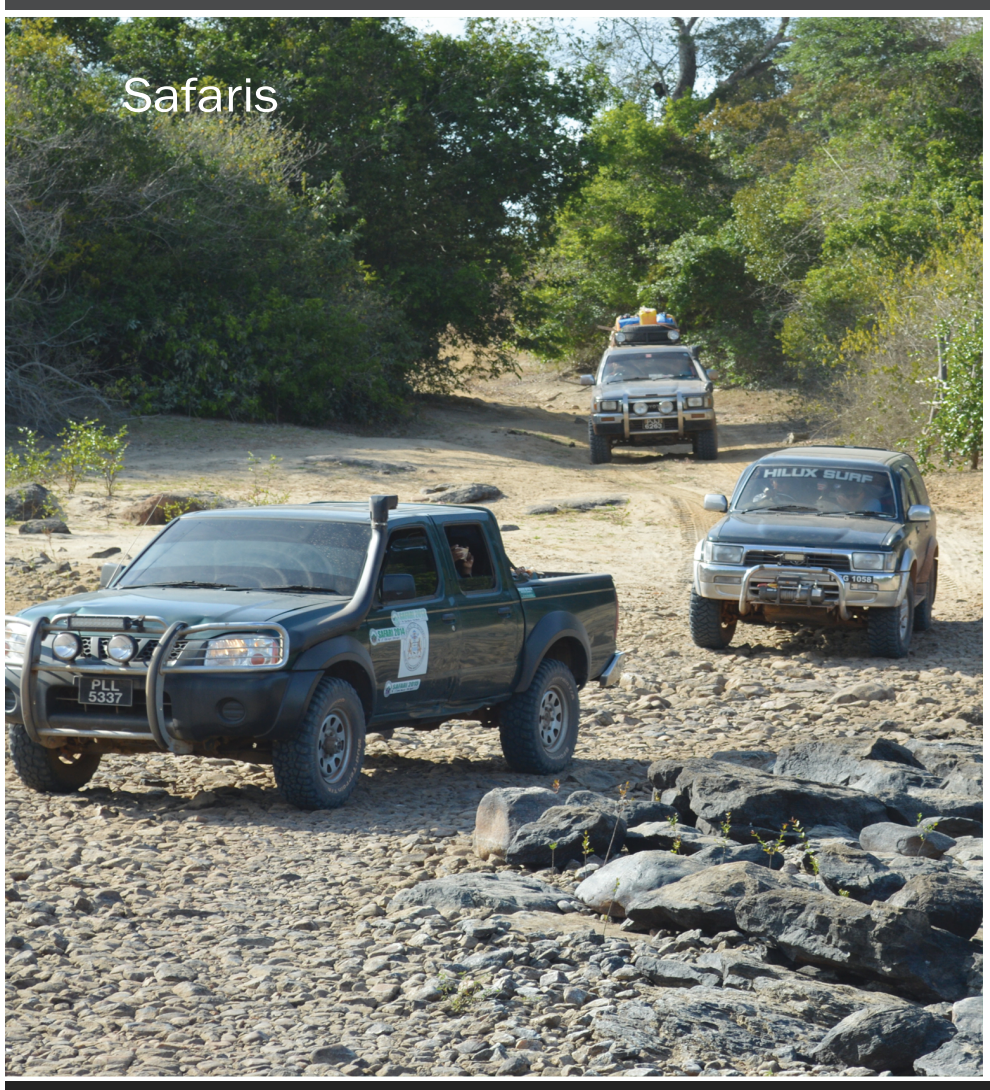

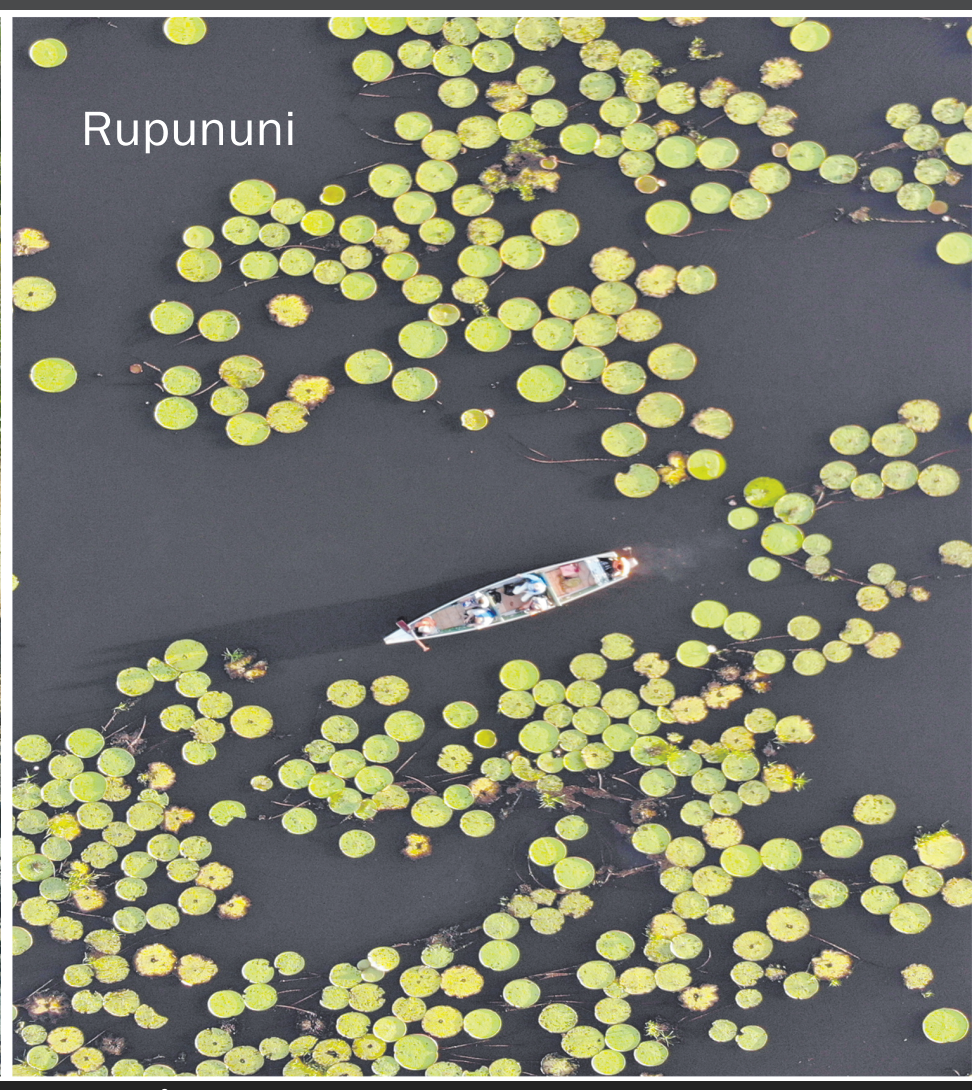

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