

Transcript of the address by His Excellency, Brigadier David Granger, President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, at the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO)/Ministry of Public Health's Launch of the "Health at 50 in Guyana" Progress Health Report

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President David Granger: I am happy to be here just before the item 'Vote of thanks' [Laughter]

I am certainly pleased to have been part of the proceedings this evening as we welcome the publication of "Health at 50 in Guyana" Progress Health Report 1966-2016. This is an important report and I hope that all Guyanese get an opportunity to read it. It is being produced by the Ministry of Public Health in cooperation with the Pan-American Health Organisation/World Health Organisation.

As you heard already from Dr. Adu-Krow, it assesses our achievements and chronicles our challenges over the years. We are very proud of our association with PAHO/WHO over the years and this evening is really a crowning achievement of over 40 years of collaboration.

My remarks this evening will be centered on what I call 'moustiques sans frontières' which in English is 'mosquitoes without borders'. [Laughter]

Every Guyanese is vulnerable to the health impacts associated with the environment. Vector-borne diseases are a public health threat throughout the Americas and we all know that here in Guyana, especially those who come from New Amsterdam. The risks and threats are changing constantly and Guyana, a country on the continent of South America has nearly three thousand kilometres of land borders with its three continental neighbours Brazil, Suriname and Venezuela and we also have a 432-kilometre-long coastline on the Atlantic.

Legitimate intercontinental air travel, contraband smuggling (a Guyanese tradition) as well as the notorious illegal back-track practices to neighbouring and foreign countries, global shipping transport all lead, possibly, to the transmission of mosquito-borne diseases. Invasive mosquitoes can introduce new infections and become established in our country.

Changes in land use, global warming, the extension of public infrastructure and the economic exploitation of the environment by mining, logging, trading and tourism; also the importation of used tyres and the increased human and commodity traffic at port towns such as Bartica, Charity, Corriverton, Kumaka and Parika, all contribute to the possibility of invasion of new species into Guyana.

International cooperation therefore, such as we have with PAHO/WHO is necessary if we are to manage the changes that are taking place and if we are to combat the threats to our country.

Mosquitoes have been proven to transmit disease to travellers. Infected travellers can pass on the pathogens to invasive mosquitoes which in turn can infect humans; even those who have not travelled. The movement of mosquitoes is assisted by travel, by infected humans and of course transnational trade in commodities.

Mosquitoes, like all insects, complete their life cycles and digest their blood meals at a faster rate in warm temperatures such as we experienced for several months during the El Niño season.

Vector-borne diseases constitute a major public health threat. The Ministry of Public Health over the past five years from 2011-2015, recorded a total of 168,240 positive tests for malaria; 1,255 positive tests for dengue and over 100 cases of filaria. There were 9,044 positive tests for malaria, which means that there is one malaria positive test every hour in Guyana; 76.8% of these were in the age group 15-49 years (luckily, I'm out of that age group. [Laughter] 'Just', I mean give or take 20 to 30 years).

Vector-borne diseases are transmitted mainly by mosquitoes but, as I said at the start of this short address, mosquitoes have no borders. The diseases they transmit are considered as transnational health threats. We witnessed this with chikungunya two years ago - a word that some Guyanese never met before and some still can't pronounce. We are witnessing this again with zika.

Vector-borne diseases can now cross frontiers and infect large numbers of persons. Guyana cannot afford the human, health, social and economic costs associated with these five fatal diseases: chikungunya, dengue, filaria, malaria and Zika.

Vector-borne diseases can severely impair health and reduce human productivity as those who have had 'big-foot' would know. They can kill. They impose a huge burden on the limited resources of the family, of the community and of the State.

Vector-borne diseases are a national problem. The Barima-Waini, the Cuyuni-Mazaruni, the Potaro-Siparuni and Rupununi regions; our four large hinterland regions, are the most affected in our country. Vector-borne diseases, therefore, must be eradicated at all levels; at the level of the Municipality, at the level of the Region (RDCs) and at the level of Central Government.

Guyana has had some successes in combating these vector-borne diseases. They have, however, proven to be very resilient - at one stage I'm sure a lot of Guyanese thought we had eradicated malaria, but it's back with a vengeance. We need to develop a much broader approach to combat this public health threat. That approach must involve a more careful management of the environment.

Vector-borne diseases must be tackled as an environmental hazard. Vector-borne diseases are linked to human activity and particularly in our country, reckless and irresponsible environmental practices.

The main vector-borne diseases are transmitted by mosquitoes which thrive under conditions, which sometimes are made possible because of this irresponsibility in our hinterland and elsewhere: miners who fail to cover their mining pits and replant their claims after completing their operations can leave open craters and pools which can become breeding grounds for mosquitoes; logging activities that are unregulated similarly, can create larvae breeding sites for species of mosquitoes that transmit the malaria parasite and we know that very well. Over and over again, over the last five years, I've met young men who, straight out of school have gone straight into the hinterland; gone straight back home with malaria - a terrible cycle taking a toll on our young people.

Environmental pollution also promotes the growth of mosquito population. The dumping of receptacles, particularly those old tyres that people import into this country, plastic bottles, Styrofoam food boxes, coconut shells, all of these when they're dumped into our drains help to create stagnant pools. The abandonment of equipment, old boats, old cars, old containers and vehicles, and the disposal of solid waste in unregulated roadside dumps, canals and creeks provide habitats for mosquito larvae.

Flooding caused by climate change and poor drainage can create stagnant pools in which mosquitoes thrive. Sound environmental practices are, therefore, pivotal to reducing and removing the breeding sites for mosquitoes that cause vector-borne diseases. Sound environmental practices must be a part of the solution to the vector-borne disease threat in Guyana.

Guyana has now opened a new chapter in its development. Guyana is pursuing a green agenda. That agenda is a pathway not only to economic prosperity but also to social wellbeing. It is more than the contribution of our forest to carbon storage; it is more than the avoidance of deforestation; it is more than the introduction of renewable energy sources, it is more. It is about protecting our health; the health of our people and our children; it is about protecting our patrimony.

It is revolutionizing our mastery of the environment in every single area. The 'green' economy which we pursue is about the prevention of environmental degradation; it's about coastal-zone management; it's about protected areas in national parks; it's about solid waste management. It's about embarking on new renewable energy sources; it's about protecting our wildlife, which will reduce the loss of our country's biodiversity and balance the needs of humans with those of the environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, Guyana's green agenda is an important part of public health. It recognises the diseases, particularly vector-borne diseases and their spread are associated with environmental hazard. Guyana, a small, developing country cannot afford the continuous loss of its human resources and human productivity because of the five fatal life-threatening diseases: chikungunya, dengue, malaria, filaria and zika.

Guyana's green agenda is an opportunity for us to establish the mastery of our environment in order to achieve the goal of reducing the spread of vector-borne diseases. Public health is the responsibility of the State. Public health, however, is a complex issue and it cannot be solved by the State alone.

Central government must work closely with the ten regional administrations and the regional administrations in turn, must work more closely with the municipalities and neighbourhoods and that is why Local Government Elections are so important, to make sure that all of these elements are in place.

This is one of the reasons why this year, 2016, we created three new towns and these towns would serve as capitals to three huge regions. Mabaruma will be the capital of a region that is four times the size of Trinidad and Tobago. Lethem will be capital of a region that is bigger than Costa Rica. Bartica will be capital of a region that's bigger than The Netherlands. These capitals are important if we are to develop these regions and to protect our environment.

These capital towns will also strengthen the bond between central and regional government and between regional and municipal and local administration. Every region must have a hardy hospital, must have a robust public health system.

Guyana also must work more closely with international partners such as PAHO/WHO if we are to achieve the public health outcomes we seek; if we are to enjoy the good life for the next 50 years.

I thank you.