



**Address of His Excellency, Dr Mohamed Irfaan Ali, President of the
Co-operative Republic of Guyana, and Commander in Chief of the Armed
Forces on the aggressive stance by Venezuela**

Fellow Guyanese and well-wishers of Guyana across the Globe.

Thank you for joining this special event from Guyana and many parts of the world.

I wanted to talk with you about two troubling matters that are plaguing our nation now.

The first is a renewed aggressive stance by Venezuela toward our country and the other is the ravages our people are enduring from the Coronavirus, COVID-19.

My friends, these are extraordinary times for our country.

While we stand on the cusp of remarkable economic and social development that heralds a better life for all, we are confronting a historic battle with an invisible but vicious enemy – COVID-19.

The pandemic has already taken the lives of far too many of our people.

One would have been bad enough; but the sudden and unexpected loss of 175 lives has cast a pall of grief over our nation.

With 7,528 infected persons currently, we are striving to contain the virus, to stop its spread, and to protect all in our society.

Amid this emergency in public health, our nation is also made to confront renewed aggression from Venezuela, even as we seek peaceful and legal means to end its disregard for the long-settled definition of our borders.

As President of our beloved country, my single most important responsibility is to keep the Guyanese people safe.

It is the first thing I think about when I wake in the morning.

It is the last thing on my mind at night.

And my working day is consumed by it.

But, I want no mistake about it: my Government is doing all in its power to vigorously protect our people's health and our country's territorial integrity.

Just as we will not relent in the battle against COVID-19, so will we not bend to threats to our national security.

We may be a small country, but we are a proud people.

We have no military might, but we have moral and legal right.

We pick fights with no one, but we will resist threats from anyone.

In doing so, we will seek the protection of international law and the support of the international community.

Let me now relate to you specific developments in relation to Venezuela that have occurred over the last three weeks.

On January 7th, the President of Venezuela, Mr. Nicolas Maduro issued a decree before his country's National Assembly.

In that Decree, Mr. Maduro purported to establish a new maritime territory of Venezuela called the "Territory for the development of the Atlantic Façade".

He claimed, for Venezuela, "sovereignty and exclusive sovereign rights in the waters and seabed adjacent to Guyana's coast, west of the Essequibo River".

Our response to this was swift.

We advised our sister-states in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the international community, including the Organization of American States – the OAS, the Commonwealth and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States.

Support for Guyana was immediate.

CARICOM Heads of Government on January 12, publicly repudiated “any acts of aggression by Venezuela against Guyana”.

The CARICOM leaders also reiterated their “firm and unswerving support for the maintenance and preservation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Guyana”.

Other nations, including the United States of America and Canada, also indicated their concern about this further threat to Guyana.

It should be noted that President Maduro issued this new Decree, even as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) pronounced that it has jurisdiction to hear and decide upon a case brought by Guyana in refutation of Venezuela’s contention over the 1899 International Arbitration that fixed our borders in a “full, perfect and final settlement”.

It is well known that Venezuela had rejected the jurisdiction of the ICJ.

It is a matter of speculation as to whether the Decree, issued by the Venezuelan President, was a reaction to the decision of the most authoritative International Court, simply because it did not favour Venezuela.

Be that, as it may, on January 21st, we received distressing reports that a Venezuelan naval vessel had seized two Guyanese civilian fishing vessels – the Lady Nayera and the Sea Wolf – operating off the coast of Waini Point within Guyana’s Exclusive Economic Zone.

This incursion by Venezuelan armed forces into Guyana’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its arrest and detention of the crews of Guyanese fishing boats is a flagrant violation of international law and the sovereign rights and jurisdiction of Guyana over its maritime spaces.

The crews and the fishing vessels are still being detained by the Venezuelan military at Port Guiria in Venezuela, despite Guyana's formal protest to the Venezuelan authorities through diplomatic channels.

My Government also immediately informed the international community of this latest violation of international law by Venezuela and its illegal and arbitrary arrest and detention of Guyanese citizens in Guyana's waters.

Guyana has registered to the Government of Venezuela its protest, in the strongest possible terms, at this unlawful and aggressive action against the State and people of Guyana and has insisted upon the immediate release and return of the two Guyanese vessels and their crews.

On January 27th, CARICOM Heads of Government again publicly called on Venezuela to "desist from aggressive acts that will seriously undermine the peace and security not only of Guyana and Venezuela but the entire Caribbean region".

Further, the CARICOM leaders called "for the immediate release of the crew members and vessels".

On the same day, the Organization of American States (OAS) condemned "the illegal detention" of the two Guyanese registered fishing vessels and their crew.

The OAS demanded the prompt and safe release of the crew and their boats and reiterated "its support for the rules and processes set by international law regarding ongoing territorial conflicts"

The OAS emphasized that the resolution of the issue between Venezuela and Guyana "is a matter that lies under international jurisdiction, and cannot be settled by unilateral actions."

The Organization of 33 countries was clear that "any attempt to derail this international legal process, such as the decree issued by the Maduro regime, is contrary to international law and standards, and has no legal bearing or significance".

My fellow Guyanese, I have given you all this detail because I want to stress that not only do we, Guyanese, regard our cause as right and just, but so too does the international community.

We have friends.

We are not alone.

We have the international community behind us.

I also want to advise that last night, I received a letter from the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Antonio Guterres, in which he reaffirmed on January 30th, 2018 he chose the ICJ as the means “to be used for the solution of the controversy” as he was empowered to do under an agreement signed in Geneva by all parties in 1966.

The Secretary-General acknowledged that the Court is proceeding to adjudicate the merits of the case.

Noting that the bilateral relationship between Guyana and Venezuela “is broader than the controversy” should both the Governments of Guyana and Venezuela wish to avail themselves of his good offices role “to address other important issues”, he remains available for that purpose.

Guyana is fully committed to the ICJ process.

We believe international law and independent international jurists of the highest calibre offer the most credible and definitive way in which to put an end to the Venezuelan contention.

Therefore, we will continue to pursue that course.

At the same time, Guyana is not averse to engaging Venezuela on bilateral matters in which we have a common interest.

These would include dealing with the increasing number of Venezuelans now seeking refuge in Guyana, as well as how we might collaborate, as neighbouring states, in contending with the COVID-19 pandemic which has spared neither of our two countries.

However, such discussions while welcomed, especially if the UN Secretary-General wishes to play a good offices role, will have to be preceded by a clear demonstration by Venezuela that it will desist from any further acts of aggression against Guyana, starting with the release of the Guyanese fishermen and their vessels.

Fellow Guyanese, we are a peaceful nation.

We always choose the path of peace and the rule of international law to resolve our issues.

We will remain firmly on that path, while we pursue justice for our country.

I now turn to how we are tackling the other threat we face – COVID 19.