

National Day – 15th anniversary of Third Republic
Wednesday 18 June 2008 Unity Stadium, Mahé, Seychelles

President René, Your Excellency the Secretary General of the Indian Ocean Commission, Your Excellencies, members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished guests, dear Seychellois brothers and sisters,

Each time we gather here on 18 June, we pay tribute to our Constitution – this document which is the supreme law of our country. Today we celebrate its 15th anniversary.

All that we have done during those past 15 years, we did so, conscious that we are a small country, but proud that much had already been achieved.

We did so, conscious of our vulnerability in relation to the world at large but confident that we had the capacity to overcome our challenges.

Today, we have cause to celebrate. Let us celebrate together our harmony as a people; our political maturity, even though we are still a young democracy; our compassion in difficult times when we join together to help our neighbours; our sense of responsibility and resilience as we strive together for our country's betterment; our economy which is growing in spite of the global recession; our socio-economic achievements, such as in health, education and housing; our human resources which we have nurtured and developed and which are showing their worth; our young people who are constantly seizing new opportunities; our sportsmen and artists who, through their success, are doing us proud; our stature on the international scene, particularly in relation to the environment, in governance and in the advocacy of the cause of small island states where our achievements and leadership role are recognised.

And let us celebrate our UNITY, the key to our success!

Ladies and gentlemen, this year, the commemoration of our National Day is an exceptional event. The armed forces of France and Seychelles are marching side by side. It is a symbol of cooperation based on common values of kinship, respect for traditions and national identity. It symbolises a cooperation which is forging ahead in the face of the great challenges of the 21st century. It is a cooperation based on a sense of the future. On behalf of the people of Seychelles, I would like to thank the French Republic and, in particular, the detachment from the Armed Forces of the Southwest Indian Ocean Zone (FAZSOI), from our sister island of La Réunion, for doing us the honour of sharing with us this historic occasion. We also salute the presence of the Secretary General of the IOC, who is doing us the honour of representing the member states of the Indian Ocean Commission. Seychellois brothers and sisters, our country has a rich past. The history and the experience that we have shared have led to the emergence of an independent people.

Our history can be interpreted in different ways. We can interpret the different chapters of our history according to our respective personal beliefs. We can debate the merits of each of those chapters. But the fact remains that it is the history of a people which reminds it of its origins and helps in defining what it wants its future to look like. Regardless of how we interpret the past, when we look to the future we need to focus on what unites us as a people.

In looking at the future, our vision, our strategy, should reflect the aspirations of all Seychellois.

It is for this reason that 18 June holds so much importance for our country and for our nation. It is a sacred day which represents the desire of the people of Seychelles to put all differences aside and work together for the progress of our country. It is the commemoration of the adoption of our Constitution, this document which is the voice of all Seychellois.

Our Constitution is a reflection of our history. It also indicates the course for the future. It is the compass which guides us. Our Constitution can ensure that all our institutions are strengthened and become more efficient so as to serve the people better. In our daily life, our Constitution guarantees the rights and responsibilities of the people, in all their aspects. Our Constitution is at the service of the people. At the service of the people: this is the key phrase. Our Constitution springs from the will of people. All our laws ought to reflect the service that they can render to our nation.

Governance and security, building on our harmony and political maturity

The laws and the institutions of the Republic of Seychelles are there to protect all the inhabitants of this land. We have to reinforce those institutions

Our Constitution reminds us that with each right comes a responsibility. Every citizen has a responsibility to implement and reinforce our Constitution as well as all other laws which guarantee the rule of law and ensure that we progress in peace and harmony. Every citizen should respect the law. I ask that all agencies whose role it is to apply the law do it well, impartially and rigorously. I insist that that they assume their responsibility. I want the law to be followed and respected by everyone.

Seychellois brothers and sisters, my government is committed to building on the political maturity that we have established. It is for this reason that we are establishing:

- a law for the protection of human rights and a commission to ensure its implementation;
- a law on ethics in the public service and a commission to oversee it;
- a review of our Constitution and all other laws where necessary;
- a review of the judiciary;
- the strengthening and reinforcement of our police force;
- the reinforcement of our capability to intercept and seize drugs, even before they reach our country;
- new legislation to combat drugs and provide for more severe sentences for drug traffickers.

People of Seychelles, I believe in a system of government which is absolutely upright. Our progress depends on institutions which are strong and which inspire confidence.

Our socio-economic situation – our resilience and sense of responsibility - will take us far.

In my State-of-the-Nation address in February, I spoke at length of our social and economic situation and on the consequences of globalisation for our country. We have to bear in mind that we cannot stop the process of globalisation but, together, we should try to help one another overcome the difficulties and, where possible, protect ourselves from its stronger currents.

We should not lose track of our vision for a new Seychelles, laden with opportunity for our children, our young people, our workers and our senior citizens, just because the world obliges us to face new challenges. On the contrary, it is in times of adversity that a people proves its resilience and sense of responsibility.

We need to adopt certain measures, while it is still timely to do so. Nonetheless, in these difficult times, it is my government's duty to ease the burden of those citizens who are more vulnerable.

This is a fundamental principle of my government, and we shall always stand by it.

Social justice – our compassion unites us

Social justice has always been close to my heart. I was elected by the people of Seychelles on the platform of “a heart for every Seychellois”. It is a principle which is grounded in the philosophy that no Seychellois will be left behind.

Seychelles is recognised as a country which has done much to establish a social welfare system that is remarkable.

In this context, we have adopted certain other additional measures recently to help those who are more in need. These include:

Increasing the assistance based on means-testing from R400 to R600;

Contributing towards the costs of day-care and child-minding under the means testing scheme;

Revision of the household income threshold for bursary allowance from R6,000 to R6,500, with effect from 1 July 2008.

The cost of living – we have to strengthen our solidarity

The cost of living and the increases in the prices of basic commodities are a daily concern. We have to strengthen our compassion as a nation to continue to bring us together in the face of such issues.

Government is doing its part. But those who benefit from the opportunities our country provides have also to make a contribution.

The price of fuel, for example, keeps increasing. We use the tax on petrol to ensure that electricity tariffs remain affordable. It is for this reason also that the public bus fare is still maintained at R3.

Last year we introduced fiscal readjustments for a modern and sustainable economy. We launched Strategy 2017, which contains specific targets with a view to double the wealth of our nation.

But we are faced today with a situation where we have to shield ourselves further against external shocks. We are faced with new challenges, particularly huge increases in the prices of food and energy. There is also a shortage of many staple foods. Rice, for example, is one of the most highly sought-after commodities in the world.

Seychelles does not produce hydrocarbons, does not plant rice, does not grow wheat, and does not produce maize in any significant quantity. All of these have to

be imported. We have to find more money to import these commodities. We've had to review our agricultural programmes. The more we produce locally – at a price that is reasonable to consumers – the less we depend on imports.

Food security

Our agriculture and fisheries sectors have to become more dynamic. We are taking new measures to develop these sectors further and to adapt to the new situation.

We are, for example:

Encouraging all homes, where possible, to grow food;

Promoting the incentives already in place for the agriculture and fisheries sectors.

These include 0% tax, GST exemption on all capital equipment and non-payment of business tax on profits of less than R240,000;

Allocating more land, including on the Anse Royale plateau, for agricultural production;

Ensuring that all land allocated for agriculture is well utilised for that purpose;

Installing more facilities such as water supplies, and the allocation of foreign exchange for the importation of inputs for agriculture;

Removing the quota system in order to increase production;

Subsidising, by a large percentage, the production of animal feeds;

Offering the possibility for farmers to have their own foreign exchange accounts in the banks;

Reducing the interest on Development Bank loans;

Supplying fuel to fishermen at prices that are a quarter of what is charged at fuel stations.

There are agricultural and fishing ventures that are already doing well in Seychelles. We have to do more and better. We have to be more innovative to increase and diversify production with a view to achieving greater efficiency.

Government will continue to give all the support where necessary.

Subsidies where needed

One of the fundamental principles of our government is to put people at the centre of development. It is in this context that we will continue to do whatever is possible to mitigate the impact of price increases on our people. Subsidies cost our country a lot, but we are conscious of the need to help our people in these times. The subsidies ensure affordable prices for essential commodities and services. It is for this reason that we subsidise fruit juices and milk that are produced locally, and other basic commodities such as rice, flour, edible oil, potatoes, onions, lentils etc.

On top of that, my Government subsidises many services such as:

Giving a substantial discount on the first 300 units of electricity;

Foregoing R300 million worth of taxes on fuel supplied to the PUC;

Keeping bus fares at R3 instead of the real cost of over R7;

Maintaining the discount on the price of cooking gas;

Subsidising school meals;

Continuing to offer loans from government compatible with individual families' capacities to repay;

Offering the possibility, in the near future, for people who so wish, to repay their loans over a longer period of 30 years instead of the current 23 years.

The total costs to Government of subsidies on food, transport and electricity amount to some R350 million a year. This is not an insignificant amount. There is a limit to what a government – any government – can actually do to subsidise

commodities indefinitely. We have, together with all other countries in the world, to try and find the solution to the global problem of increased prices and shortages of food. My participation recently in the TICAD conference in Japan, and also the FAO food summit in Rome, allowed us to place Seychelles and other small island states at the forefront of this global debate.

Seychelles has always practised a policy of national wealth-redistribution in the last 30 years, whereby people who have benefited from the opportunities offered by our country in return contribute to the wellbeing of those who are less fortunate. Education is free; health services are free, even when there is the need for overseas treatment; government continues to invest in housing; our young people continue to attend universities, no matter what their means; government continues to assist children's homes and orphanages; our elderly citizens are assured a life of comfort and dignity.

We are strengthening our capacity to bring relief to those who are most affected by the commodity price movements. There will be, for example, the presentation of a new Bill before the National Assembly to seek greater protection for consumers.

The world crisis in fuel, food and essential commodities has not deflected us from our principle of helping those who are most vulnerable.

How many governments around the world are doing as much?

The principle of hard work and opportunities for our country's progress

We have no control over fuel prices or over the production and prices of food on international markets. What we do have today is a more educated and healthy people. We have more tools, more incentives and a lot of opportunities at our disposal to overcome the challenges and continue on the road to a stronger economy and a more prosperous society.

Let us turn our challenges into opportunities, as we are doing in our agricultural sector in response to the world food crisis.

We have to take note of the costs of subsidies provided by government, and their impact on our economy. In the long run, we have to build up our resilience and reach a level of development whereby we can adapt to changes in the international arena through our productivity alone – without recourse to subsidies. Through our hard work, through our efforts, we can reach such heights.

Workers and consumers all over the world realise, more than ever before, that every cent earned through the sweat of their brow, has a greater value than any state support.

I have always maintained that the key to our progress as individuals as well as a people is through our work. When we work, our economy progresses. We create more jobs, more opportunities and more wealth.

As already announced, government is undertaking a salary review for the public sector which will be based on productivity and performance.

Strategy 2017 lays down clearly what we have to do to double our GDP in the next 10 years. Today our GDP per capita is over \$10,000.

We are moving. The economic landscape of our country is being transformed rapidly. Many opportunities exist in our country.

Our growth rate stands at 7.3% despite the stagnation prevalent in many developed economies.

We have built a fleet of five modern tankers. This is no mean feat for a small

country and represents a large investment for the people of Seychelles. Our young professionals who are returning to Seychelles are launching themselves in innovative businesses, such as in the offshore sector or in other financial services.

With the opening of a new offshore bank – BMI – the development of our financial services sector is taking on a new dimension.

There is no shortage of work in Seychelles! There is work for everyone who wants to work.

New opportunities present themselves every day.

Investment and confidence in our economy continue to grow. Approved investment projects total \$3 billion for the next five years.

There is growing interest in investment in our country. Many companies and individuals are interested in investing in Seychelles. This demonstrates the confidence that our country generates internationally. We have been described as a hotspot by several analysts. Seychellois are also increasingly investing in their country. More and more Seychellois are embarking on joint ventures with foreign investors.

We need to have an all-encompassing vision for the development of our country. And that is why my government will always ensure that the benefits of investments are reinvested in our people. We aim to:

Continue putting facilities, including land, at the disposal of Seychellois enterprises. We shall endeavour to rationalise existing initiatives aimed at small and medium businesses, in particular on the Providence Industrial Estate, to provide for a harmonious and productive development environment; we need to continue to empower Seychellois to create more wealth for our country;

Continue with our land bank projects and housing projects, especially for those who are most in need;

Finalise the first phase of our condominium project, while putting in place the financial arrangements for the next stage which will ensure that our graduates and young professionals have access to appropriate accommodation;

Continue to protect our cultural and natural heritage;

Enable more Seychellois families to participate directly in the tourism industry so that they can earn more foreign exchange while offering our visitors a richer and more authentic experience.

We have many choices in Seychelles. We have the choice to seize the existing opportunities for our personal growth, the blossoming of our young people and the fulfillment of our families' needs. These are the choices which underpin the Seychelles of tomorrow.

Conclusion

Seychellois brothers and sisters,

Let us stand together today for what we have always believed in — social justice and our country's progress.

It is crucial that we maintain our values as Seychellois. It is important that we maintain a social conscience.

We need to have an individual conscience as well as a collective one. What we do as an individual impacts on society.

I am aware that many of us are experiencing difficulties at this point in time. I am also aware that the majority of Seychellois understand the present state of affairs.

In my meetings with the public, I see marks of our resilience and I am impressed by the fact that many people are assuming their responsibility to confront the challenges of our age.

A barrel of oil has reached \$140. Many predict that it will reach \$200 before the end of the year. The world is in turmoil on account of this. We are also feeling its effects. We need to change certain habits. We need to strive to adapt to this reality. We need to prospect for new sources of energy so that our country can continue to forge ahead.

We are a young nation but we have accomplished a lot in a short space of time. Look at our children, look at our senior citizens! Look at the opportunities available to our young people! Look at all those who are working hard, giving the best of themselves and benefiting from the fruits of their labour!

Seychellois have the capacity to succeed, to surmount difficulties and to overcome challenges. We can reach even greater heights.

We can only succeed if we accept the present realities. We can succeed if we demonstrate the resilience needed to surmount difficulties, if we assume our responsibilities, assume our duty towards our family and our country and help our brothers and sisters who are in need. We shall succeed even further if we remain united and if we maintain the harmony in our country. Our unity and our courage will see us emerge as a stronger nation. Let us maintain our stability for peace and progress. Let us maintain the credibility and confidence that we have built in our nation.

Brothers and sisters,

Every year, we come together on 18 June, when we pay tribute to our Constitution. This means a lot. The Seychellois are proud of their country, are proud of their identity. Let us continue to work for our one and only Seychelles.

Article 40 of our Constitution reminds us of our fundamental duty to promote the national interest and national unity. Through our participation in the various events to commemorate our National Day, we are observing this duty.

I thank you all for your presence here tonight. I also thank all our brothers and sisters who are participating in this event at home, throughout Seychelles and overseas. Happy National Day!

May God continue to protect and bless our beautiful country.

Thank you