

December 24th 2021

A JOYOUS CHRISTMAS 2021 THANKS TO GOOD LEADERSHIP

Introduction

The Christmas season is in full swing after a bit of a slow start but by the evidence of the hive of activity in capital city Kingstown, the presence of Christmas lights glowing brightly in communities across SVG, Sunday shopping and a restructured Nine Mornings Festival, things are definitely “heating” up. Reflecting this past year, the idea of our beloved country preparing to celebrate this season may not have crossed the minds of many as the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic were compounded by an explosive eruption of the La Soufriere volcano. Much like last year, we had to cancel Easter festivities, and continued cancellation of Vincy Mass, and although there was some increase in activity, bars, restaurants and night-spots still operate way below normal levels. With Christmas Day just a day away as of the publication of this article, let us reflect on the fact that Christmas this year for us is even remotely possible because of the management of this country by our ULP government. Many developed countries with their resources and advancements in medicine and technology, are preparing for what is likely to be a fourth wave, with the discovery of a Omicron strain of the Covid-19 virus. This ULP government has done well in managing the affairs of State through this very difficult year, ensuring that vaccines are available to Vincentians and continuously amending/updating the Covid-19 protocols, taking care of thousands of displaced Vincentians during the volcanic eruption and providing income support for affected workers. Let’s now reflect on the year we’ve had to gain an appreciation of the significance of our ability as a country to celebrate this joyous season.

The Spike in Covid-19 Cases

After a hotly contested General Elections in November 2020 that saw the re-election of the ULP into office with an increased parliamentary majority, and a busy Christmas that saw many nationals and visitors arriving here, January presented a stark contrast. In all of our celebrating, many ignored protocols that caused an unfortunate natural result as our country saw a spike in Covid-19 infections. This created many disruptions to schools, economic activities and made an already challenging situation a lot more difficult putting increased demands on the resources of the government. The infection figures rose steadily and people began to get critically ill, needing hospitalisation with the ultimate fear being realised as our country recorded its first Covid-19-related death. This number would peak at 12 over the next 8 months, but the infection rates remained a concern and the government had to ramp up testing, invest in equipment, hire additional staff and expand capacity by adding wards at the MCMH to accommodate Covid-19 patients. By March, this country through the work of the government became one of the first in CARICOM to secure Covid-19 vaccines for its nationals and work begun to try and encourage as many Vincentian nationals and residents to get vaccinated. With all our best efforts, the competing voices of the anti-vaxers and the politicising of this pandemic by the Parliamentary opposition and some executive members of workers unions created significant vaccine hesitancy that negatively impacted the country's effort. By the end of August, 5 months after we had received the first batch of 40,000 doses of vaccines, our country had fully vaccinated less than 12% of the population and this led to a second spike. This time however the spike was a lot more deadly and more than 60 Vincentian lives were lost to Covid-19 between September and November. Covid-19 had a devastating impact on our economy, our education system and remains the single deadliest event in more than 50 years

Eruption of La Soufriere

In the middle of the pandemic, with many interruptions to life as we know it here in SVG, the La Soufriere Volcano that had been erupting effusively since December of 2020, finally erupted explosively in April 2021. This led to mass evacuation of approximately 20,000 individuals living in designated red and orange zones, thousands of whom had to be placed in temporary emergency shelters for months until August 2021. Many others were accommodated in private homes, by friends and families but their stories of sudden displacement as a result of the volcanic eruption were very similar. With all the schools across mainland Saint Vincent occupied, the entire education system shifted to online teaching, which although was the best option at the time, was generally accepted as not the most ideal format for teaching/learning. Communities that housed the shelters did their best to make the displaced individuals feel at home away from home by integrating them almost entirely, and many friendships were formed. The reality is however, while our temporarily displaced citizens made the best of the situation, it was a difficult period being away from home with the uncertainty of the damage done to the properties they left behind. Taking care of the temporarily displaced was a mammoth task, but the government took on this task with a focused seriousness that made the operation appear simpler than it really was. Millions were spent to ensure that supplies such as mattresses, food and water were available to shelters as well as private homes hosting individuals. Residents moving back were given financial support as well as food packages to make their transition easier and those who lost income including farmers, vendors and small business owners were given income support.

Conclusion

The leadership of this government during this extremely difficult year and the focused nature of targeted interventions to address the Covid-19 pandemic and the volcanic eruption, is the reason why Vincentians can look forward to a bright Christmas. Much has been injected into the economy as the government implemented a social safety package unlike anything in any other CARICOM country to ensure that our people are able to celebrate this season. Comrade Ralph and the leadership and members of the Unity Labour Party take this opportunity to wish our nation, a Merry Christmas.