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ADDRESSING COVID-19 MANAGEMENT AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS

Introduction

This country like all countries around the world, continues to deal with the many impacts of Covid-19 on our people, addressing the many challenges facing us. From the very beginning, the Prime Minister of this country, Dr. Hon Ralph Gonsalves, saw dimensions of this pandemic that were not obvious and articulated them at various fora locally, regionally and internationally. We are reminded of the 4 dimensions articulated by comrade Ralph: Health, Economic, Social and Security (HESS) and the understanding that tackling Covid-19 successfully required that leaders look beyond just the impact of the pandemic on health, and instead examine linkages with the other dimensions. Dr. Gonsalves also recognised that as discussions began about a possible vaccine being developed, there could arise what he referred to as “Vaccine nationalism” where developed countries, having first access to the lifesaving medication could ignore the realities of poorer countries. He raised this issue during the General Debate at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly. Below is an excerpt from the statement made by Dr. Gonsalves, addressing the need for a coordinated approach to the distribution of vaccines in a manner that doesn’t disadvantage developing countries. This is an obvious and clear indication of the importance of thoughtful, mature leadership, that doesn’t offer “knee-jerk” responses, but anticipates challenges and proposes solutions to address those challenges.

“Mr. President,

The simple truth is that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a profoundly altered condition of life, living, and production. None of the awesome challenges arising from this altered condition can be solved by incrementalism or minimalist pragmatism which merely tinkers with the pre-existing global economy. To be sure, human ingenuity and science will produce a vaccine within the next few months or a year and the COVID rate of infection, hospitalisation and deaths will come down globally.

But haunting questions remain: Would the vaccine be available cheaply and universally to all peoples the world over? Or would its distribution be so skewed within, and across

countries, that there is likely to arise a deafening roar that: “Only Rich Lives Matter?” The good intentions of our United Nations and its specialised agencies such as the World Health Organisation may nibble away at the inequity of a skewed outcome but their impacts are likely to be only marginal unless there is an enforceable, international rules-based compact between all countries and major pharmaceutical companies to deliver universally and affordably the fruits of science and human ingenuity. It cannot be the usual result of corporate profits ahead of people’s lives, livelihoods, social solidarity, and security.

Even if, in this instance of COVID-19, the international community rises to the challenge and confirms that faith and good intentions without practical works is an illusion, would this be only an episodic response which leaves the pre-existing global order in place until the next, and inevitable, pandemic arises? This irrational dangerous cycle has to be reconfigured with a global consensus not merely to “build back better” but to build back optimally and enduringly for all of humanity’s sake.

Fundamentally, Mr. President, the old order is passing away before our very eyes as a consequence of the pandemic, but a new one is yet to come into being; indeed, there is not in place even a transition to a better, optimal, and enduring condition. We are still quarelling about inconsequential matters, insisting on too many sideshows, and casting our gaze askance away from the main events, metaphorically.

It is a truism, repeatedly ignored by powerful nations globally and ruling classes in dominant countries, that our central global challenges cannot be solved in isolation of each other or only on the terms of the powerful. Yet the old reflexes kick in, harming inevitably the strong and the weak, though not in equal measure. So, we end up, metaphorically, with a proud man who is ignorant of that which he is most assured.

Right reason and mature reflection teach that over the past 50 years of the dominant human civilization, and its appending off-shoots, there has been an explosion of individualism and freedom engendered by a huge enlargement of personal, financial, technological, and social spaces. Atomised individualism has been elevated as the apotheosis of progress; and social solidarity has become frayed, tattered, and diminished as a public good. So, along comes a pandemic and the atomised individual has to rely on the prudent and collective good behaviour of his neighbors to stay healthy. This circle cannot be easily squared in an individualistic, dog-eat-dog social order; and, metaphorically, all hell has broken loose.

Thus, internally in our societies, we ought in the current altered condition, to build a social individual, not an atomised one; this social individual necessarily, has to be grounded in the requisite of social solidarity. Across nations, too, we must initiate and build a fresh compact of enduring solidarity, as we in our Caribbean Community (CARICOM), have done with much success, despite a limitation of resources. Our United Nations, and its specialised agencies, are the locales for the construction of an ambitious, renewed global compact, not of world government, but of a genuine community of nations through a bona fide multilateralism, grounded in international law. This is not merely a technical exercise but a profoundly political one of the first order in which this revitalised compact is efficaciously fashioned on the fertilised soil of genuine commitment among all nations. Let us thus Lift Humanity Higher!

In this regard, powerful states must roll back their unilateralist, unwholesome and prejudicial constraints on weaker nations. The list is long and includes: unilateralist sanctions; weaponising of the trade, banking and financial system; the misuse and abuse of so-called “blacklists” by developed countries against developing ones; the unilateralist termination of correspondent banking relations on purely spurious, and hypocritical, grounds; the breaking of international law, willy-nilly, to serve narrowly national interests on this or that issue, including the existential matter of climate change; and the relegation of Small Island Developing States to the expendable margins of the global political economy.”