**STRENGTHENING TIES WITH GARIFUNA COMMUNITIES IN OUR AMERICAS**

**By**

**Unity Labour Party**

**Introduction**

One of the many remarkable stories of the Unity Labour Party’s time in office, is undoubtably the attention given to the Garifuna communities in this country. The indigenous people of this country who suffered unspeakable atrocities by colonialists who came here hundreds of years ago, were never given the true respect deserved by previous governments. Our Garifuna communities that are generally found in rural Saint Vincent were largely characterised by extreme poverty, poor education, and inadequate amenities, as was the case with rural SVG prior to 2001. To emphasise this point, the Garifuna communities that are on the northern part of Saint Vincent beyond the dry river, were not only underserved and underdeveloped, thy communities were essentially cut off from the rest of the island because of the Rabacca dry river. The refusal of the previous NDP administration to ensure electricity and other services beyond the dry river based on the notion that to put such services would represent a waste of taxpayers’ money since the residents were unable to pay for those services, offers a glimpse of the level of disdain shown to Vincentians of Garifuna descent. There was no recognition of the paramount chief Joseph Chatoyer, beyond sporadic mention of the colonial viewpoint of a duel between him and an English swordsman who defeated him, there was very little information shared about the Paramount Chief and his legacy as a leader of the indigenous people of SVG.

The ULP has completely changed the way Vincentians who are the descendants of the Garifuna are perceived and treated, and the administration continues to implement policies that embrace holistically that part of our Vincentian heritage. The naming of Paramount Chief, H.E Joseph Chatoyer this country’s first national hero and establishing an obelisk in his honour at Dorsetshire Hill where he was ambushed and slaughtered, was a first major step in recognition of our Garifuna heritage as a significant part of this Vincentian civilisation. This was further strengthened by the recognition of March 14 as National Heroes’ Day and the abolishing of the previously celebrated January 22 as “discovery day”. Those larger and more symbolic gestures that speak to our heritage were reinforced by practical policy initiatives that significantly improved the lives of rural communities such as those that are comprised primarily of the descendants of the Garifuna. The building of the Rabacca bridge to link the north with the rest of the country has been a magnificent catalyst that has opened up business and other opportunities for those communities north of the dry river. Improved housing, land reform initiatives, improved educational and professional opportunities and increased investments in infrastructure and other services have all occurred over the last 21 years to improve the lives of residents in Garifuna communities.

**Linking with the Orinoco Garifuna Community in Nicaragua**

Comrade Ralph accepted an invitation from the President of the Republic of Nicaragua, H.E Daniel Ortega, to attend the 43rd anniversary of the 1979 popular Sandinista Revolution on July 19, 2022. From the moment the Comrade accepted that invitation, he requested of the Nicaraguan government that accommodations be made to facilitate a visit by him and the other members of the delegation to the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, where people of Caribbean descent including Garifuna of Vincentian descent live. The Nicaraguan authorities agreed and arrangements were made to have Comrade Ralph visit two communities on the Caribbean coast: Orinoco where descendants of Vincentian Garifuna live, and Bluefields where other Nicaraguans of Caribbean descent live. The visit by our Comrade Prime Minister was a very exciting one, and the residents of both communities welcomed the delegation very warmly. For example in Orinoco, they celebrated the visit with a ceremony that featured speeches and cultural activities attended by large crowds. In Bluefields, the two universities in the region: The University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (URACCAN), and the Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University (BICU) conferred on PM Gonsalves the “Doctor Honoris Causi Award”. This was indeed a special moment for Comrade Ralph and signalled a critical moment in the relationship between the Garifuna communities of Nicaragua and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Both the events in Orinoco and Bluefields offered Prime Minister Gonsalves the opportunity to speak and address the large gatherings in response to the many statements of welcome and gratitude offered by the local government officials, and other leaders who spoke. The fundamental theme of the Comrade’s comments was that we have been divided for too long, and that it’s now time to build bridges and develop closer ties and relationships. The things in common between our Caribbean brothers and sisters on the Caribbean coast, and those of us here in SVG are greater than those things that differentiate us, and we must focus on those commonalities to build stronger ties. The cooperation between SVG and the Garifuna communities will be very real, through cultural and educational exchanges to facilitate the transfer of knowledge between us here at home and those descendants in Nicaragua. The Prime Minister also pledged to assist with the completion of a building already under construction in Orinoco to be used as a community centre type facility, both financially as well as with the help of some tradesmen from SVG working on the building.

The mission to Nicaragua and the visit to the Caribbean coast is just a first but very important step in linking the descendants of the Garifuna from SVG with those of us here at home. This ULP administration that has done excellent work in raising the awareness of our Garifuna heritage here at home, will expand that work to establish and strengthen ties with other Garifuna communities in OUR Americas.