

INDEPENDENCE DAY MESSAGE 2024

**“45 YEARS OF TOGETHERNESS, PROSPERITY, AND
PERSEVERANCE”**

by

**Dr. The Hon. Ralph E. Gonsalves
Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines**



[Address on the Occasion of the 45th Anniversary of Independence of
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on October 27, 2024
At Victoria Park]

Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
October 27, 2024

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[FORMAL GREETINGS]

INTRODUCTION: ANOTHER WAY TO COMMERORATE

Fellow-Vincentians, residents, and visitors, this year, we are altering, in part, the way in which we celebrate and commemorate the anniversary of the reclamation of our national independence.

Hitherto, we have held this ceremony in the morning when the risen sun brightens into blazing heat; today, we are now gathered as the sun is going, or has gone, down at evening tide. In the yesteryears, the central feature has been the parade suffused with military discipline; today, that parade has continued with wondrous innovations, and is bolstered by

the presence of a contingent of forty officers of the British Navy, thirty-eight of whom are Vincentians; and after the Prime Minister's address this evening, Victoria Park will be enveloped in amazing cultural performances reflecting the genius of our people's creative imagination and expression, as we come home to ourselves and to our history in the engendering of uplifting outcomes.

We have learnt from our experiences, and those of others, including the Hebrew people, who, through the wise, advised us in the Book of Ecclesiastes that:

“He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds will not reap-----

“In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand:

for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or

whether they both shall be alike good.”

And, we looking good this evening!

At the outset, I express gratitude on behalf of the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, to all the amazing volunteers and workers from all walks of life, who through their labours of love and caring, dedication and skill, have made it possible to lift the burdens imposed upon us by Hurricane Beryl, and have helped immediately to put us on a sound path of relief, recovery, and reconstruction.

RECLAMATION OF INDEPENDENCE 45 YEARS AGO

Forty-five years ago, on October 27, 1979, St. Vincent and the Grenadines reclaimed its independence after 216 years of Britain's initial forced occupation, colonial hegemony, and fascist overrule of our country, from 1763, onwards.

The first 117 years of Britain's colonization completely remade our country. These years were extraordinarily savage, brutal, and destructive: Britain carried out a pogrom of native genocide of the indigenous Callinago and Garifuna people; the

enslavement of African bodies, forcibly transported to St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and elsewhere; the robbing of indigenous folks of their lands and other natural resources; the establishment of a socio-economic order steeped in overt racism; the enmeshing of our country, and others, into an exploitative global political economy of mercantile and industrial capitalism; the enthronement of a system of governance in which the British monarch, the colonial mandarins, and an imported British planter-merchant elite ruled, exclusively, the political roost; and the conscription, in succession, of indentured labourers from Madeira, India, and Africa after the emancipation of the enslaved in 1838.

In the process of colonisation, Britain subverted our country's sovereignty and independence; dismissed contemptuously the right of the native inhabitants, the enslaved and the indentured, to self-determination; and ripped apart the traditional governance arrangements of the indigenous people.

Nothing else which colonialism did in our country compensates for all the death and enslavement, immense pain and suffering, damage and mayhem it imposed upon us: Not the English language, not cricket, not its common law, not its vaunted science. There can be no ledger here for costs and value-creation; none for burdens and benefits; that is the path of apologists for the naked violence of colonial oppression.

On October 27, 1979, our national leaders, pre-eminent among whom was our first Prime Minister, the heroic Robert Milton Cato of blessed memory, representing our national community, reclaimed our country's sovereignty and independence, consequent upon the negotiating of Britain's colonial departure.

We, today, must ensure always a staunch defence and promotion of our nation's sovereignty and independence within the context of our quest to advance further our interests through the deepening of regional integration, and internationalist solidarity by way of our bilateral and

multilateral undertakings. You can always rely on this Prime Minister, this government, never to permit the subversion of our sovereignty and independence or to sell our patrimony, inclusive of our treasured citizenship and passports. We are not for sale. We welcome legitimate foreign investment, but not at the expense of our people's enduring interests!

We stand in the exemplary tradition of the Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, our National Hero, who led the anti-colonial resistance against the British for 32 years (1763 – 1795) in defence of the sovereignty and independence of our country.

JUST DEMAND FOR REPARATIONS

Undoubtedly, the genocide of native peoples and the enslavement of African bodies, committed by, and under the direction of, the British colonial state, have engendered historical legacies of underdevelopment, with severe adverse contemporary consequences to our people, and for which the just demand for reparations from Britain, in accord with

international law, and public morality, is being made by our Caribbean Community. Our demand for reparations will not go away; it will most assuredly intensify in the months and years ahead; and it cannot be wished away by its opponents. This is a great cause in which our government has long been in the lead; on this we will never falter nor waver.

Accordingly, I urge our friendly ally, Britain, with which we continue to have excellent relations, despite its refusal thus far to countenance reparatory justice, to resolve this matter amicably, through a mature conversation, within the framework of CARICOM's TEN POINT PLAN, as amended, for reparatory justice. If not, recourse would be inevitable to the formal machinery of the United Nations' system and the International Court of Justice for adjudication and resolution. It is simply unacceptable for Britain and other European powers engaged in native genocide and the enslavement of African bodies in our Caribbean, and Africa, to walk away scotch free; today Britain and Europe enjoy a legacy of richness and wealth derived from these crimes against

humanity; and we in the Caribbean, and Africa, continue to suffer from the associated legacies of loss of innocent, lives plunder, exploitation, dispossession, suffering, pain, and underdevelopment.

BETTER BY FAR

Without question, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a far better place today than ever since 1979, in every material particular, save and except in the behavioural tendency of a tiny minority of young males towards violent criminality. In all the material indices of life, living, and production, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been advancing rapidly, particularly since the dawn of the 21st century. The roll-call of advances is evident all around us in economic prosperity and alterations, in the economic paradigm for the better; job and wealth creation; technology and modernity; social equity and inclusion; education and health; housing and physical infrastructure, including roads, bridges, airports, and seaports; water, electricity, and telecommunications; road, air,

and sea transportation; sports and culture; social protection and poverty reduction; disaster preparedness and management; justice and the law; regional integration and enhanced global relations.

Importantly, too, there is an established trajectory for further development, sustainably, despite our inherent vulnerabilities as a small island developing state; the external threats, inclusive of climate change and the inequalities and unfairness of the dominant political economy of monopoly capitalism; the self-inflicted wounds of senseless bouts of disunity, atomised individualism and rank selfishness by too many; and a disturbing violent criminality by tiny groups of young males.

Of course, our nation's immense strengths and possibilities resident particularly in our people, our lands and seas, our formal institutions of governance, the tried and tested uplifting values and cultural well-springs of our Caribbean civilisation, and our friendships and alliances externally, do not assure

that continued progress is inevitable. There are still immense challenges arising from our weaknesses and limitations, and the lurking possibility of our collective failure to take advantage, optimally, or even sufficiently, of our strengths and possibilities.

The avoidance of a desecration of our future depends, in part, on a central requisite of high-quality political leadership of energy and will, vision and skill, in communion with an organised, politically conscious, and informed people enveloped in humanity and the glue of solidarity. Cold, timid, unenergetic souls without the appropriate vision and creativity will inevitably lead us into an oppressive pessimism and a spiraling descent into an unfathomable abyss; anger, bile, and a thirst for a vengeful power lubricate such a descent into instability and retrogression. Be aware, always, of the ravenous wolves who put on lambs' clothing; examine their horns.

From experience we know that there is, for countries like ours, a thin margin for error. We must not take silly chances, including the making of wrong political choices; government is not a lotto; your voting ballot is not a lotto ticket. Be calm, patient, balanced, and wise, always!

Fellow Vincentians, the immense progress we have made over the last 23 or so years, have been achieved despite having to endure and recover from twelve significant natural disasters, including the damage and destruction wrought by the volcanic eruptions of April 2021 and Hurricane Beryl of July 1, 2024; the debilitating COVID-19 pandemic; the ravages inflicted by global monopoly capitalism; the loss of the preferential market in Britain for our bananas; and the knock-on effects of global wars and conflicts; and more.

Our people's unity and solidarity, despite some contrived dissonances, our perseverance, hard and smart work, in concert with our people-centred government's policies and

actions have ensured remarkable recoveries, consolidations and advancements. It has been a marvel to behold.

CURRENTLY, MIGHTY DEEDS

Currently, our country is embarked on mighty deeds arising from visionary policies centred upon the paradigm shift of building a modern, competitive, many-aided, post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional, and global. A few highlights will suffice: That incredible dream-come-true, the Argyle International Airport, is working exceedingly well with multiple international flights out of the metropolitan cities of New York, Miami, Charlotte, London, and Toronto to satisfy the demand of tourists for our expanding high quality, hotel plant, and our magnificent landscape and seascape; the construction of the EC \$650 million Modern Port in Kingstown scheduled for completion in May 2025; the breaking-of-ground yesterday of the EC \$200 million Modern Acute Care Hospital at Arnos Vale; the ongoing EC\$250 million road construction programme, nation-wide; the ongoing EC\$75 million school

rehabilitation programme; the start-up of the roll-out of the Saudi-financed EC \$170 million multiple projects in health, housing, education, culture, and security infrastructure; the immediate EC \$30 million project in agriculture and fisheries; the EC\$100 million climate-change mitigation and adaption projects including the EC\$50 million sea defence to protect the indigenous village of Sandy Bay; the ongoing development of sporting infrastructure including the EC \$100 million roll-out on the Arnos Vale Sporting Complex and the Sir Vincent Beache Stadium at Diamond; and the massive, ongoing expenditure for relief, recovery, and reconstruction consequent upon Hurricane Beryl which caused in excess of EC \$800 million in damage, half of which is in the area of housing; the actual economic loss is, of course, way above that figure, amounting to some 30 percent of Gross Domestic Product.

The recovery and reconstruction in the aftermath of Beryl has stretched our country's resources to breaking point, including the lack of a sufficiency of workers and contractors to do all

that is required, post-Beryl, plus the execution of the pre-existing and imminent roll-out of major capital projects.

The government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines thanks our international partners, bilateral and multilateral, for their support. However, we need far more support especially to address the housing needs of 4,993 families or 19,444 persons directly affected by Beryl's devastation.

As at October 23, 2024, there are 550 persons still in shelters and 558 in tourist accommodation. These persons in clusters of roughly 350 families have had their houses severely damaged or destroyed. Other similar families are in private accommodation of their friends and families.

Thus far, the Ministry of Housing has addressed the housing needs of 1,446 households or just over one-quarter of the affected households; these households have had their houses rebuilt, or are in the process of being rebuilt, or have received material assistance for self-help. Significant progress has

been made in the area of housing in Canouan, Mayreau, Bequia, and other parts of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, but progress in this respect has been lagging in Union Island because of the nature of the devastation wrought there by Beryl; however, there has been an increasing up-tick recently on Union Island.

Still, I reiterate that we need more construction workers and contractors for housing reconstruction. And individual homeowners have an obligation to be actively engaged in their rebuilding, to the extent of their respective individual means and capacities. This government is the first in our history to take up the responsibility to lead the process of ensuring the actual repair or rebuilding of each damaged or destroyed house. But it cannot reasonably be left to the government alone.

Immense progress has been made everywhere on the other fronts, in the wake of Hurricane Beryl: The clean-up; the return of all students to educational institutions; health

facilities and social protection; water, electricity, and telecommunications; citizen security, and more.

I commend, again, the volunteers of all walks of life, the public servants, state agencies, private sector entities, civil society organisations; regional and international entities, and friendly governments which have worked assiduously to assist, markedly, in the relief, recovery, and reconstruction effort, thus far. There is still a great deal of work to be done in these respects. We are certainly building back stronger and better.

SOME ANNOUNCEMENTS

Fellow-Vincentians, as usual, I have some announcements of immediacy to make — seventeen of them:

First, certain time-bound fiscal reliefs which I made last year will roll over for another year to December 31, 2025, in respect of the following: (i) The 5 percent monthly supplementary, non-taxable salary addition for all nurses, nursing assistants,

and nursing aides — some 750 in all — costing over \$2 million annually; the 2025 Budget will make further upward adjustments for all categories of central government employees; (ii) there will continue to be, indefinitely, the VAT relief for domestic consumers of electricity up to 250 units (kilowatt hours) per month; and (iii) the duty-free concession on cement will be extended, indefinitely; I am resolved to continue to make cement the most affordable in the OECS.

Second, earlier this week, on October 24th, 104 national scholarships, national exhibitions, special awards, and bursaries for university education were awarded on the basis of the results of the 2024 CAPE and Associate Degree examinations. This is a staggering record of accomplishment by our students. This package of awards is valued at over EC \$30 million. In this year's awards, a record number of 32 fully-funded five-year national scholarships were awarded; each carries a maximum price tag of up to \$600,000; four students this year tied for the top prize, the Prime Minister's Award; each receives a gold medal and a cash prize of

\$20,000.00. Further, our government awarded, nearly 2,000 Tuition Scholarships for university students, another record, beyond last year's record of 1,300. Additionally, this year, 50 students were granted Economically-Disadvantaged Student Loans by the state-owned National Student Loan Company to pursue university education. This year, too, a record number of other university scholarships were issued through several bilateral arrangements with other governments, especially Taiwan, Cuba, and Morocco. It is worth recalling that in the year 2000, prior to our government, only four fully-funded national scholarships were awarded!

Third, for the 368 recipients of economically-disadvantaged student loans from the National Student Loan Company who have graduated from university and who are current with their loan payments, will receive, at government's expense, relief from one-month's payment on their student loan for December 2024. This will cost the government appropriately \$200,000. This relief is additional to the reduction of the interest rate on

the student loans to 4.5 percent annually, as was announced last year.

Fourth, the second-year students at the Community College, all teachers at all primary, and secondary schools, owned or assisted by the government, will receive brand-new laptops [some 2,500] courtesy of the government early in 2025. This will cost in excess of EC \$3 million.

Fifth: All 320 new applicants for the one-year Support for Education and Training (SET) Programme have been approved for employment as of November 2024. Further, those who are graduates of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Community College will receive an increase of \$200 monthly on their existing stipends, and those who are university graduates will receive an increase of \$300 monthly. The current SET employees, over 200, have had their tenure extended until December 2024.

Sixth, our government will establish this year a National Orchestra and a National Choir. To this end, preliminary steps have already been taken.

Seventh, our government, in conjunction with the private sector, the football clubs, and the SVG Football Federation, spearhead the establishment of a Semi-Professional Football League.

Eighth, the Sports Department of the government will be restructured to ensure optimal functioning in light of the huge expansion of top-quality sports facilities, the vastly improved performances of our sportsmen and women, and the increased roll-out of educational, training, and job opportunities for sportsmen and women.

Ninth, the Housing Repair and Reconstruction programme will continue unabated until all those who have suffered from the volcanic eruptions and Hurricane Beryl have had their housing needs adequately addressed. We do not as yet have all

the requisite resources for this huge task, but we are getting there.

Tenth, for the three-month period October 1st to December 31st, the government will pay income support of \$600.00 per month to categories of persons affected by Beryl, namely: Unemployed heads of households; owners of micro-enterprises; farmers, farm workers, fishers and their crew; and workers laid off in the tourism sector. The Ministry of National Mobilisation is currently culling the lists to ensure that there is no double-dipping. The recipients will be paid by bank cards. The October and November payments will be made in November; the December payment before Christmas 2024. This income support for the three months is expected to cost the government over \$15 million. The government has already provided production support of \$2 million to some 2,200 plantain and banana farmers, and \$250,000 to 130 arrowroot farmers. Significant support in cash and kind have already been provided, too, for the households and students affected

by Beryl. The \$600 income support monthly will continue for a period in 2025, to be announced in Budget 2025.

Eleventh, for the three-month period, December 2024 to February 2025, a special Cost-of-Living Allowance (COLA Special) of \$175 monthly is to be rolled out for 3,000 means-tested, particularly vulnerable households costing \$1.575 million (\$525,000 monthly). This programme will be executed by the Ministry of National Mobilisation. The government will evaluate this programme after the initial roll-out with a view to a possible continuation further into 2025.

Twelfth, the government is ramping up its surveillance of those unscrupulous retailers who are reportedly engaged in price-gouging. The Consumer Protection Act and the Price and Distribution of Goods Act will be utilised to the fullest to curtail price gouging especially in the unusual situation occasioned by Hurricane Beryl.

Thirteenth, the duty-free concessions on “Christmas” barrels instituted unusually early as a result of Hurricane Beryl will continue to January 31, 2025.

Fourteenth, the government and the Police, through the Commissioner of Police, have reworked the numbers for the payment of all the police officers, from constable to Commissioner, for the extra provision of security during the recent T-20 Cricket World Cup competition in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The payout of approximately \$500,000 to the Police will be effected shortly.

Fifteenth, the allowances for particular categories of public employees including aggrieved police officers, junior doctors, and some others, will be reviewed upwards for 2025. The details of these and other enhancements are to be provided in Budget 2025.

Sixteenth, the beefing up further of the institutions of the State charged with the maintenance of citizen security,

including the Law Courts, the Police Force, the Coast Guard, the Prisons, and the National Commission on Crime Prevention. The details will be presented in Budget 2025.

Seventeenth, the following persons are being appointed as a Sporting or Cultural Ambassador:

- (i) Shafiqua Maloney, as a Sporting Ambassador, an amazing athlete of exemplary resilience, as exemplified by her performance in the 800 metres women's final at the Paris Olympics, 2024.
- (ii) Jomel Warrican, the West Indies Test Cricketer, as a Sporting Ambassador. He is the second to be so-named from the distinguished Warrican family of Colonarie, following in the footsteps of Irvin Warrican, deceased.
- (iii) As Sporting Ambassador, Fitzgerald John Hinds King, former national footballer, coach, a FIFA referee, and

trainer of special athletes. He has been, too, a personality in the carnival culture for some forty years.

(iv) As Sporting Ambassador, too, Oalex Anderson, national footballer and outstanding youth personality.

(v) As Cultural Ambassador, Alvern “Ali” Cadougan who has led the iconic Nelson Bloc Costume Band since 2003, the first woman to have led a mas band for such a prolonged period. Her earlier years were spent, too, in the cultural fields of dance and drama.

My dear Fellow-Vincentians, in the continuing challenging months ahead, inclusive of the recovery and reconstruction after Hurricane Beryl., and in the tackling together of the composite tasks of sustainable development in our people’s interests, let us daily renew our faith, our hope, our love, and our dreams for better lives and livelihoods; while others may sleep to dream, we must dream to change our world for the better. To be sure, we will encounter difficulties and disappointments, but there is so much for all of us to be

satisfied about: Peace and security, political stability, good governance, growing prosperity, vastly improved living standards, ample opportunities for personal advancement, social protection for the disadvantaged, and the foundational bedrocks of family life, social justice, freedom, democracy.

Amidst it all, we affirm that our nation is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man and woman. There is no easy road ahead; there has never been an easy road for us since colonisation and the empire descended upon savagely over 260 years ago. But in unity and solidarity, we have survived and thrived; our trajectory for further advancement is better now than ever before despite the threats, externally, and the self-inflicted wounds, internally, to our lives, living, and production.

Our ongoing social democratic revolution had its genesis eighty-nine years ago in the anti-colonial uprising of October 21, 1935. Since then, every succeeding generation has had its own mission to make our lives and living much better than

before. To a greater or lesser degree, each of our predecessor leaders — George Mc Intosh, Ebenezer Joshua, Milton Cato, James Mitchell, and Arnhim Eustace — has made his contribution to our nation's advancement amidst the collective endeavours of the committed thousands upon thousands of sung and unsung patriots over the years. We, today, have been, and are building upon, the efforts of our forebears. And we looking good!

The torch of leadership which I currently bear aloft will one day be passed, voluntarily or otherwise, to another. For me, it has been, thus far, a long and satisfying journey: I went to primary school in Colonaire, bare-footed, from rural St. Vincent, for seven years, between 1951 and 1958, without pipe-borne water and electricity; and here I am with your support and God's blessing. It is not where you start or from where you come that is important; always of consequence it is About what you are doing where you are and where you are going. The process begins with you, but it does not end with

you alone; each of us can grow and develop in solidarity with others.

On this 45th anniversary of the reclamation of our national independence, I pledge, yet again, to serve you the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the best of my ability, with all my energy and will, vision and skill, always in your interest. And I pray to Almighty God that I do not leave behind any unfinished task. The rest I leave to you, and to my God to whom I have knelt and undertaken to do justly, to love mercy and goodness, and to walk humbly with Him.

As we go forth, let us not make perfection the enemy of the good. Let us each do our very best on this our Earthly City knowing, fully, that we will meet perfection only in Beulah Land. Today, here and now, we are much better off than we were when we started in 2001; tomorrow promises to be better yet. And we must act so as to never desecrate our future.

Happy 45th Anniversary of our Reclamation of Independence!

Long live the beautiful people of St. Vincent and the
Grenadines!

Thank you!