

Transcript of the Honourable Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, closing remarks at the opening ceremony: Agrofest (Barbados) 2022 – Greening Together Ah Caribbean Thing.

May 27, 2022

Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley: Thank you very much, mister master of ceremonies. My dear brother, the Honourable President of Guyana, His Excellency Mohammed Irfan Ali. Ministers of Guyana and Barbados. Distinguished guests all. And of course, all who are listening to our voices.

I don't believe that I have to add much this evening to what has just been said.

And if we are going to act in harmony, then I have first and foremost to adopt the entire speech of my brother just delivered here on behalf of the people of Guyana and Barbados.

This relationship, as I said have said when I last visited Georgetown, goes back way beyond 170 years, and indeed, Barbadians left in droves just after emancipation to come to Guyana to help build the sugar industry and the factories.

Guyana was able to repay that by leading in Barbados the process of industrialization in the 1950s and 60s and 70s. And then, of course, Guyanese have worked back and forth here over the course of the last 20 years, boosting Barbados' construction industry, boosting Barbados' agricultural sector. Indeed, when we go tomorrow to Browne's Pond, I am sure that you will see the evidence of exactly what I am talking about.

I say these things only very briefly to tell you that we believe that we are standing on a strong platform and that it is time now for us to move to the next level, especially as we face these multiple challenges that have confronted us over the course of the last two years.

That President Ali and Minister Mustafa have been able to move with lightning speed over the course of the last 18 months to put this region in a position where we not only endorse the plan in March in Belize at the CARICOM heads of government meeting, but were able then to meet in Guyana last week in perhaps one of the largest agricultural investment fora ever to be held in this Caribbean region in the post-independence era, is of significant mention for us. And we thank you both for leading that effort.

I want to thank my own Minister of Agriculture and his entire team, the Permanent Secretary, Terry Bascombe, the Chief Agricultural Officer, Keeley Holder, and all others; Mr. Leroy McLean with the Black Belly Sheep Programme and others; and of course, Mr. Paul, you joined the team with us in Guyana last week - to let you all know that the work which you have been putting in on behalf of Barbados to allow us to work with the people and government of Guyana on these critical projects, is absolutely essential if we are going to make the cost of food and access to food more available.

It is a shocking thing, as you heard from the representative of the World Food Program this evening, that almost four out of every ten Caribbean people are considered food insecure. We have a responsibility to turn that around. And I believe that our ability to master, one: production, investment, logistics and processing will help us to do so.

So as I said, I am not going to repeat the words of my dear brother.

I want to also salute those who have come today to also help us put on this Queen's Park ground, a model house, coming from the excellent hardwood that Guyana has to produce in a position to be able to allow us to meet the interests of having that silent revolution in housing in our own country. Last year we were badly hit by Hurricane Elsa and we are still struggling to finish the repairs and the rebuilds that are necessary because of the vastness of the demand on the government and because of the fact that 90% of those houses that were destroyed were from people who live below the poverty line, and 95% of them are people who were not insured.

We believe that this model house here, presents some opportunities along with the other solutions that we have laid on the table. And we invite all Barbadians as you visit Agrofest this weekend, to also take a visit of that house to see what potentially can be available for those Barbadians who are badly in need of housing. I thank you, President Ali, yet again, for ensuring that once again, you opened up the opportunities for our two countries to work together in this critical area of housing.

So whether it is in the area of agriculture and food security, whether it is in the area of housing, whether it is in the area of the logistics, whether it is in the area of the gold exchange, whatever it is, we have recognized that in this world you are not going to be able to succeed if we try on our own. Just simply asking for us to even place orders, as you heard from President Ali, we are at the bottom of the chain because persons don't believe that these numbers really excite them in any major way. And that is why regional unity is needed now more than ever if we are going to turn the corner and to move away from these multiple crises.

I have said that the world is at war. It is at war with COVID. It is at war with climate. And regrettably, it is at war with war. And if we in this region don't work together to turn it around, we will not get anywhere.

In Barbados, our own people are facing the ravages of what it is to see cost of living increase in ways that we did not expect five years ago or three years ago. Because of the circumstances that I just referred to, we have seen prices rise at a rate that is really unsustainable and unacceptable.

I have asked the different Ministries to start working yet again with the different players to see how we can contain these prices and how we can shield people where we cannot contain prices. Indeed, this is an effort that is being undertaken globally, and one only needs to look at what happened in the United Kingdom with the Chancellor of the Exchequer up to yesterday, to understand that this is not a problem that is unique to the Caribbean region.

But when I walked in Guyana last week and I could see pineapples at the equivalent of what would be a US\$1 and almost all forms of ground provisions at between US\$0.25 and US\$0.30 and US\$0.40 per lb, then I know that we have a solemn obligation to get the transportation issues that are bedeviling us solved and to get those other obstacles that preclude the easy importation of produce and products in this region into one another's borders, that we have an obligation to solve it. And that is why I have willingly accepted to work in this project with you, President Ali, because we cannot see produce rotting or we cannot accept the word glut in our vocabulary as we go forward in circumstances where our people need access to cheap and affordable and good food.

More importantly, the processed food that we are importing over and over and this is where I end in talking, not to the people who are here, not to the government Ministers and public servants alone, but I want to talk to the consumers, the consumers of Barbados and the consumers of the Caribbean, because in your hand lies the choice. And more often than not, what is causing our problems with respect to escalating health care costs, escalating hospital costs, comes as a result of our inability to eat properly. We have a duty to do, as our forebears did, to eat what we grow and to grow what we eat. And we have a duty to ensure that in so doing that we can manage our own health. I have spoken over and over about the danger of the pesticides and the other things that are being used on our food crops, that reduce our resistance to antimicrobials to be able to fight off, that we need to fight off viruses. We have a duty to talk with each other and to understand that what may come fast and easy may not always be best for us.

Now is the time for us to get the equation correct. Get it correct in terms of eating what we grow and grow in what we eat. Get it correct in terms of not using the kinds of pesticides and fertilizers that will cause us harm as human beings. Get it correct in terms of ensuring that we don't simply use a plantation model to the development of agriculture going forward, but that we use a combination of technology, investment and education of our young people to ensure that we get the best returns out of agriculture. And that is why you will hear us, President Ali and myself, talk all the time about how we will involve more young people with respect of agriculture, and that is why we sent the first set down to Guyana to do the training in the construction of the shade houses and to work elsewhere with them to learn how to do what they are doing under those shade houses.

We also intend to involve a partnership with the development of shrimp and prawn farming because we believe that we should not be importing these things into our tourism market for our hoteliers to buy, but we should be able to produce them locally. And it is this combination of youth, investment, technology and the confidence that we have, buttressed of course, by the choice of the consumer that will allow us to turn the corner with respect to where we can get to being food-secure in this Caribbean region.

My friends, there is a house that I want us to tour before it gets too late, and there are stalls that we want to visit. But before we close, I want simply to say to the consumer that we are not only looking at the back end for you. We have in Guyana, seen last week, the launching of the Stabroek marketplace, which will allow us to be able to have digital, a digital marketplace that will be available to all of our producers and all of our consumers.

And why?

We know today how often people do most of their shopping on this thing called a phone or a computer or a tablet, and we must not be left out in the region from having a marketplace that is available to our producers so that they can let you know, what is it that you are producing and selling it in Guyana or Trinidad or the Bahamas or Belize or Barbados or Jamaica. And if we can do that and use ourselves as that domestic marketplace, as that base, then the world is our oyster therein after because the one thing that the technology does is to democratize access to the entire world.

I want to thank my brother, Saboto Caesar, for coming here and representing the people and Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. We believe that the opportunities for partnership with Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in terms of complementing each other with agricultural production, is very much there. With your altitudes and with your mountains, there is no reason why we should not be importing Irish potato, English potato

from you and those other produce that require a cooler temperature, rather than seeking only to bring them in from the North Atlantic countries. And I hope that you and your brother, Minister Indar Weir and Minister Mustafa, therefore, will start to look and see how Saint Vincent and the Grenadines can compliment us in what we are trying to do here with respect to food security.

Similarly, our friends, our brothers and sisters from Suriname are also here. We believe in the Brokopondo Agreement which we signed in 2018 and which we reinforced in 2019 and we hope that that combination of working together can finally bring the results that you, the ordinary people of this region, want. But you must meet us halfway by making the changes in your habits and in your choices to ensure that you put Caribbean food and Caribbean food security at the top of your list because when no one else will be there for you, we in the region must be there for our own people because a time will come where the export restrictions and the transport obstacles may make it difficult for us to feed our people.

President Ali, you could quite easily have said you were busy. Your presence in Barbados at this first Agrofest after two years, represents your absolute commitment to the region and to ensuring that this project of food security in the Caribbean is something that you are not simply writing out on paper or making speeches from Georgetown on, but your presence here will motivate our people in understanding that there is a train that has left the station, and that train is the Caribbean Food Security Station, and its captain is Irfaan Ali. I know that you are on a cricket ground. I know that you are a cricket fan. And I have every confidence that when this part of our history is written, that you will have scored a triple century.

Thank you. And God bless.

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