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## SPEECH AT THE GROUND BREAKING CEREMONY OF THE ARGYLE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT PROJECT

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By Dr Rudolph Matthias Chairman of the IADC on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2008

It feels as though we are inaugurating the new airport today!

Rarely is there such excitement, as we see today, at the **ground breaking** of a project.

And we should celebrate. We have truly come a long way, towards the realisation of a national dream.

Some might remember, in his now famous speech on 8th August 2005, Dr. Gonsalves had this to say:

*“...the integration of the economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines with those of the OECS, CARICOM, the wider Caribbean, Latin America, North America and Europe is limited to the extent that there are huge restraints in air access. Foreign investors often shy away from St. Vincent and the Grenadines when the limitations of air access arise due to the absence of an international airport. Indeed, at the recently-concluded Conference of Heads of State and Government of CARICOM in July 2005, I made the point that the absence of an international airport in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica is a regional integration issue of the first order. There can be no level playing-field for this reason...”*

But today, we are going to begin levelling that playing field.

Clearly, the Prime Minister and his government recognised the importance of positioning St. Vincent and the Grenadines to meet the global and regional competitive challenges.

Given the way our economy has shifted, one of the best ways of doing this is to build the Argyle International Airport.

Many of you would recall that after the Prime Minister’s defining speech on airport development on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2005, the public debate that followed centred on the question: “Can we afford it?”

There were, of course, other tangential issues discussed, but in the main, the issue that troubled objective and patriotic Vincentians most was the question of affordability.

“Can we really afford it?”

Still, the clarity of the exposition of the project and the vision shared by the Prime Minister raised the hope of Vincentians at home and abroad, for the first time.

In fact, for most Vincentians, the international airport has become our “Great Expectation”.

The government had created these expectations and therefore had to work to realise them.

In the months following his speech, our Prime Minister worked tirelessly to bring together a group of countries which he calls the “Coalition of the Willing” to help our small state successfully undertake this massive project.

This “coalition of the willing” is really the **lynchpin** of this project.

Oh, I’m so sorry, wrong word!

This “coalition of the willing” is really the **Ralph-pin** of this project.

But, I can still hear many of you here today quietly asking yourselves, “boy, we really getting this airport”.

Many persons have cornered me and asked the same question. They would normally say:

“Rudy, tell me man, this is between me and you: we really getting this airport?”

### ***Specifications of the Airport:***

I can tell you, as I have told everyone who has asked me that question: We are building an international airport. And today marks a giant step in that direction.

But as you are here, I want to boldly take this opportunity to invite you back again in 2011, God willing, to witness the inauguration of the **new completed airport**.

When you come in 2011, you will see an Argyle International Airport that has:

An airstrip of 9,000 feet in length, and 150 feet in width.

You will see a modern terminal building, with over 50,000 square feet of floor space, and facilities to handle around one million international passengers per year.

The airstrip that we would have built would allow us to take jets as large as the Boeing 747-400, permitting us direct flights from North, Central and South America, and Europe.

If you turn up here again in 2011, you would also see that the operations of the international airport would be done by a well-trained team of bi-lingual Vincentians, who would have been trained in Mexico or Cuba.

And by 2011, the airport management would have been positioned to implement another part of the airport Master Plan that will guide the development of the international airport over the next 25 years or so.

You will see an airport that would have costs approximately US\$170 million, a large part of which would have come been contributed by the members of the “Coalition of the willing”.

With God’s help, I confidently expect all of this to be in place by 2011.

And I take this opportunity to invite you again to see for yourself.

### ***Coalition of the willing:***

But between now and 2011, there is a lot of work to be done.

In fact, to achieve those results by 2011, we have to move mountains!

But we are not alone in this effort. We are being strongly support by a coalition as diverse as: The Republic of Cuba, Republic of Venezuela, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, Caricom, Mexico, Austria, Malaysia, Turkey, and possibly Canada.

### ***Cuba and Venezuela:***

Over the last 2½ years or so, much work has been done to lay the foundations for the commencement of the earthworks (estimated at US\$61 million, or 36 percent of the total project cost). These works will begin within the next 4 to 6 weeks.

From September 2005 to September 2006, engineers and technicians from Cuba and Venezuela completed all the topographic surveys, as well as all the soil testing work in a laboratory provided by the Government of Venezuela.

The government of Venezuela also provided 3 automatic weather stations that have been installed within the airport zone and have been collecting data over the last two years. The wind data collected are currently being analysed to help us determine whether we need to construct a shorter runway (a “cross-wind” runway), for the smaller planes that might be affected by high winds. The wind studies will therefore continue, and would provide useful historical information for the airport operation too.

As you look around, you can see new heavy earth moving equipment. On May 19<sup>th</sup>, we received the first 13 pieces, and over the next five weeks, more pieces came. In all, we now have 44 pieces of equipment, costing US\$10 million (EC\$27 million), from the government of Venezuela as part of its contribution to the earthworks stage of the project.

We expect within the next 12 months that they will provide additional pieces of equipment to allow us to increase the workforce so that the project can be completed within the planned time frame.

The final designs too are in our possession. These were done by a team of Cuban designers and presented, in December 2007, as a gift by the Cuban government to our government.

At varying stages of the design process, we had been discussing these designs with local stakeholders (to get their input) and with the regional regulatory body of civil aviation, the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority (ECCAA), whose representative is here today.

Just this weekend, Professor Leonardo Perez, Eng. Aluko Dublin and I returned from Cuba, where we held discussions and advanced our interests with many of the agencies in Cuba that are collaborating with us on the project.

In Cuba, I also signed the contract for the first batch of Cuban workers, about 40 of them, to come here to begin construction of the airport. We expect these workers in a week or two.

In fact, 6 of the workers, including the 2 planning engineers, are already on the ground. The planning engineers have been putting together their work plans, which are now substantially complete, to enable them to being earthworks shortly after the workmen arrive.

We therefore expect another 34 workers to arrive in St. Vincent within the next two weeks, at the most.

The Cuban workers will join many Vincentians (experienced drivers, operators and apprentices) to complete the earthworks stage of the project.

When the men come, then we will start moving mountains!

***Taiwan:***

Like Cuba and Venezuela, Taiwan has also pledged US\$30 million support to the project: US\$20 million as grant funds and US\$10 million as a soft loan.

In November 2007, His Excellency Ambassador Jack Chen, handed over US\$2.5 million to the government, part of the US\$30 million promised by Taiwan for the Terminal Building, Control Tower, Roads and Other Support Services.

***Other donors:***

Our close ally and friend down South, has also come to our aid beautifully.

Recently, Hon. Prime Minister, Patrick Manning and his government provided, through the Caricom Petroleum Fund, US\$10 million for the airport project, to assist in various ways with the work that we are doing.

Austria too has provided a sum of money to help us buy the two compactors that are needed as part of the full set of machinery to begin the earth works. These compactors are being sourced now and are likely to be in St. Vincent soon.

Other sizeable contributions, some in cash and others in kind, are promised by Mexico, Turkey and Malaysia at later stages of the project.

No one can deny that the Comrade has excelled in the art of ....raising funds for the airport project!

***Our contribution:***

Though we are not a rich country, we realise that others may not come to our aid, unless we are prepared to make a sacrifice ourselves by making a significant input from our own resources into our airport project.

Our government has therefore taken the responsibility of meeting all the cost involved in **acquiring the airport site** and all other costs relating to the management of the project. These costs are huge amounting to about US\$57 million, or 34% of the total project.

*Site acquisition:*

IADC has already paid out US\$16 million (EC\$45 million) to 107 of the 131 affected homeowners.

Many of these homeowners have rebuilt their homes elsewhere or are in the process of doing so.

Over 70 of these homeowners were sold building lots, at discounted prices, at one or another of our subdivision developments at Harmony Hall, Diamond, or Carapan.

The Hon. Prime Minister promised residents of Mt. Pleasant and Argyle that the government will be fair to them and will ensure that they are no worse off in their relocation from the site. I believe that any objective person would conclude that the IADC, in its negotiations and settlement with the homeowners, has treated them fairly, or even better than fair.

Still, the nation owes a debt of gratitude to the property owners of Mt. Pleasant and Argyle who willingly relocated from their properties to make way for the construction of the airport.

Our approach in dealing with compensation for lands, must of necessity be different.

If the IADC were to negotiate with all land owners, in the way it did with homeowners, we may not be able to start constructing this airport before 2011.

The government has therefore taken the decision to acquire all the vacant land parcels within the first kilometre of the runway, and to transfer the negotiations for the price of those lands to the Chief Surveyor at the Lands and Surveys Department.

This department is the division of the government that normally deals with compensation for lands acquired. This decision would allow IADC to focus on the construction of the airport.

*Environmental issues:-*

As a responsible government, we are taking all necessary steps to ensure that the Argyle International Airport is environmentally sound.

For this reason, IADC contracted Kocks Consult of Germany to undertake an Environmental Impact Assessment of the Argyle Airport project. Two weeks ago, Kocks submitted to us their final report which contains a number of proposals and recommendations on measures the IADC could take to mitigate against the harmful effects of the construction of the airport on the environment, and those that would amplify the positive effects.

In our discussions last week with the Cuban Environmental Agency, they confirm their previous decision to assist us in putting together an Environmental Monitoring Plan, based on the recommendations in the Kocks report.

The Cuban Environmental Agency has been studying the draft final reports and are prepared now to send 3 professionals within the next two weeks to begin work on the Monitoring Plan.

The Cuban experts will be working on a team with our own Environmental Auditor and representatives drawn from other government agencies that have an interest in the various aspects of the environment that would be disturbed by the airport construction.

We have paid good money for the EIA study, and we intend to implement the proposals to ensure our airport is built in an environmentally sound manner.

*New roads:-*

Our government is also responsible for the construction of two new roads.

First: The Argyle Bypass road is being constructed by C. O. Williams at a cost of US\$5.2 million. This road is funded by the Caribbean Development Bank as a loan to the government. We expect this road to be completed before year end.

We are also in the process of designing a new road that will traverse the Southern end of the runway. This new road will provide access to the Rawacou pond, and to homes and properties on the Eastern side of the airport.

The cost of this road will also be met by our government. Construction will begin by year end.

### *Arnos Vale development and the future*

Once we have put all the necessary measures in place for Argyle to be executed properly, we will turn our attention the new city at Arnos Vale.

Oh that bright city, that is soon going up!

Just imagine it: Within one single decade, you and I have a rare opportunity to build an international airport at Argyle, and a new city at Arnos Vale.

You understand why I say, it is a good time to be alive in SVG.

I believe that Argyle and Arnos Vale together represent a kind of transformation of our Nation, that has the potential to stimulate growth and development at such a pace to eliminate poverty much faster than any other inspirational policy initiative could have achieved.

We all stand to benefit so much, as a Nation, from these developments.

It is sometimes bewildering to me, why we are not all happy for these dramatic positive developments taking place in our country.

I cannot understand either why at times we allow self-doubt to so paralyse us, that we achieve much less than we should, while we celebrate the accomplishments of others.

We need to believe in ourselves and to engender a spirit of ..... I can do.

I have always believed we could fly..... And today, as a Nation, we have taxied up the runway and have made a decisive turn.

Today we say: Control Tower, Control Tower: St. Vincent and the Grenadines is ready to takeoff!

May God bless our Young Nation!

Thank you.