

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT IN CARICOM

STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT
BY PRIME MINISTER GONSALVES DR. THE HON RALPH E. GONSALVES
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In recent months challenges have arisen in CARICOM regarding the spirit and the law touching and concerning the freedom of movement of persons in accordance with the provisions of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas.

Under the Treaty the member-states of CARICOM commit themselves to the goal of free movement of their nationals within the Community [Article 45]. Further, under the Treaty [Article 46] member-states agreed, and undertook, as a first step towards achieving the goal of free movement of CARICOM nationals, to accord to the following categories of Community nationals the right to seek employment in their jurisdictions:

- (i) University graduates;
- (ii) Media workers;
- (iii) Sportspersons;
- (iv) Artistes; and
- (v) Musicians.

Additionally, the Conference of Heads of State/Government, pursuant to the Treaty, has added more categories of CARICOM nationals to those already mentioned for “freedom of movement” status, namely: Artisans, nurses, and teachers. Other categories of nationals are on the table for further consideration for inclusion in that regard.

Each member-state has put in place a legislative and regulatory framework to comply with its Treaty commitments. In the case of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we have issued skilled nationals’ certificates under the relevant legislation. This country abides by the letter and the spirit of the Treaty and our laws. Indeed, St. Vincent and the Grenadines goes way beyond the requisites of the Treaty to accommodate

CARICOM nationals who are not entitled as yet to the right of employment under the Treaty.

Unfortunately, not every member-state of CARICOM is abiding by the letter and the spirit of their Treaty commitments. In one or two member-countries, the immigration authorities are dismissive of their countries' Treaty commitments. My office receives heart-rending stories of Vincentian nationals who have been subjected to unfair, unlawful, unconscionable, and discriminatory treatment by some immigration authorities within member-states of CARICOM.

Accordingly, I have set up a Unit at the Office of the Prime Minister, manned by Mrs. Miriam Roache, to receive complaints of unfair, unlawful, unreasonable and discriminatory treatment of our nationals by immigration authorities in the CARICOM member-states.

Moreover, I call on my colleague Heads of State/Government to address the bundle of issues attendant on the "freedom of movement" matter, including that of contingent rights, most urgently. A failure and/or refusal to do so in a fair and reasonable manner is likely to invite the most deleterious consequences for the regional integration movement.

It is sad to note that in the 21st century, some responsible persons, including some political leaders, are stoking chauvinistic fires which are latent in our Caribbean societies. This has led, here and there, to an outpouring of a malignant xenophobia particularly against Guyanese, Jamaicans, Vincentians, St. Lucians and Grenadians. It must be stopped; if not CARICOM would shortly be rent asunder.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines stands to benefit materially and practically from CARICOM in two principal ways: Freedom of movement of persons; and access to monies from the CARICOM Development Fund (CDF). At present our nationals are unfairly harassed by immigration authorities hither and thither as they travel throughout the region. And the promise of the benefits from the Development Fund has so far been illusory. Accordingly, many Vincentians are beginning to ask: Where's the beef in CARICOM? Where are the benefits? Are we to become only the

dumping ground for manufacturing commodities of questionable quality and uncompetitive prices, protected by CARICOM rules and the Common External Tariff? Are we to be the locale for enterprises from other CARICOM countries, particularly the so-called More Developed Countries (MDCs) but our nationals discriminated against elsewhere? Is this the fate of the small island countries in CARICOM?

It is historically tempting for some to bash immigrants at times of domestic economic difficulties. But to do so against one's own CARICOM brothers and sisters is surely unacceptable. It is both necessary and desirable to lift the quality of public discourse on this most important issue and avoid a race to the bottom of the lowest common denominator.

My government and I are deeply committed to CARICOM but we are left to wonder whether it would not be better for us to refrain from participating in the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) and focus on membership in CARICOM in terms of functional cooperation in education, health, climate change, the judiciary and the like, co-operation on security matters, and a continued co-ordination of foreign policy where practicable. This approach will dove-tail with our steadfast commitment to forging an OECS Economic Union and pushing for a deeper union, too, with Trinidad and Tobago.

My government is being patient with CARICOM and we will never lightly abandon the CSME. But the discriminatory antics against our nationals by some immigration authorities must stop. And the CARICOM Development Fund (CDF) must become fully operational. The administrative dragon's dance on the CDF must come to an end; and it must be open for business soonest!

I am sure, too, that in practically all these matters, my concerns are precisely those of the member-states of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States. Our people must be fully respected!