

Sugar will never die – PM

-says factories being closed to improve industry's prospects

By

[*Staff Writer*](#)

March 16, 2017

3

Amid widespread concern that the Rose Hall and Skeldon estates are to be shut down, Prime Minister Moses Nagamootoo yesterday stated that the sugar industry will not be closed but that some factories would be shuttered to improve its prospects.

The PM was speaking at the Commemorative Ceremony of the 104th Anniversary of the fifteen Rose Hall Sugar Estate Martyrs, held at the monument site in Canje, Berbice.

Nagamootoo during his address to the gathering which was filled with government officials, regional officials, sugar workers and students, stated that sugar will never “die” in Guyana, since too many workers depend on the industry for their livelihood. However, he said that sugar factories are being closed off in an effort to improve the sugar industry in general, and bring it back to a profitable state. He said, “In order to make the industry profitable it may be necessary to reduce the number of factories to make each factory work 100% and not 50%, and to take sugar cane from other estates and transport them to these factories”. He also stated that transportation will be provided, “for all workers who want to go to the other factories.”

He then stressed that the closing of the necessary factories, “will not be a loss for sugar workers, it will be a gain because you will now be contributing to sugar production that will become profitable.” He stated that only then will sugar workers and descendants of sugar workers be able to enjoy the gains from the sugar industry, and not an industry that “is going down the dark hole with no foreseeable guarantee that it could survive.”

As of December 31st last year, sugar cultivation has ceased at Wales on the West Bank of Demerara and industry sources say the government is planning to take the Rose Hall, Skeldon and Enmore estates out of production.

The PM further stressed, that it is necessary to look back at the beginning of the sugar industry, where there was mostly misery and oppression. He stated that history has taught Guyana that in the beginning of time there was some 167 sugar estates, however, as time went by, and profits declined, the number of factories was also reduced. “The number of estates were reduced by 38, and we saw by 2011, while I had been associated with another government that the circumstances [which] then existed, forced the closure of sugar estates in LBI, and ... way back in the 1950's I remembered when the chimney at Port Mourant no longer belched smoke. It was shut down and people came out in the streets wondering what will happen to their lives.”

According to the Prime Minister, it was then that, “Black Bush Polder opened, and a new future beckoned for many former sugar workers. They went into rice production with fifteen acres each, and two acres home land and they began to make lives better for themselves and children,” he continued. “The industry was diversified and the sugar workers were given alternative employment, and alternative avenues to make a life.”

He also spoke of diversifying and modernizing the sugar industry. “How do we ensure the living and

the livelihood that it ought to be better than that of our foreparents? We have to use science and technology. We have to transform the work in the sugar industry that converted human beings into mules, fetching canes on their heads, walking in the back dams barefooted and falling in punts, and breaking limbs on their bodies,” Nagamootoo noted.

“We have to transform them into workers in a modern industry. Where even if you have fewer sugar factories and fewer estates that you can make the work less burdensome, that you can convert the sugar industry that is a burden on this nation right now. It is bankrupt, it is indebted to the tune of \$85 billion, and we know that over the last three years alone government had to spend \$38 billion to pay wages in the sugar industry and to keep the factories going,” he added.

He noted that citizens have to now look at the unprofitable sugar industry differently, “We can no longer treat the sugar industry as stones around our neck, sugar is bad, its history has been.” He further charged that the industry should not be allowed to, “drag the entire nation down, should [not] be able to take monies that is to be spent on training and educating our young people, and making the livelihood, of nurses and teachers who educate us, and take care of our health, a better one, in ensuring that we pay everyone in the public service decent wages, so that they do not continue to steal and plunder our resources. We have to find an answer that is not committed to draining the treasury and pouring it down into a dark hole,” he told those gathered.

People before profit

According to Nagamootoo, this is the reality for not only Guyana but countries worldwide, “In the world today, sugar estates are closing down very rapidly, and we have to ensure that Guysuco does not come out of sugar, it must at least be able to manage a few factories and produce at least 150,000 tons that we could sell in the international market for the best price. We cannot give up the effort to transform the sugar industry, to modernize the sugar industry.”

However, he also joined with the Regional Chairman of Region Six, David Armogan and stated, “People before profit. The workers must come before profit, to ensure that wherever there will be sugar estates closure, the sugar workers are entitled and given parcels of land that they themselves can use their own resources and talent to plant alternative crops, or to rear fish and shrimps, or whatever else would be profitable for them.”

The Prime Minister also extended an invitation to GAWU to be a part of the “solution and not part of the problem, to join [government] to find answers of how we can transform the sugar industry and make the life better of all sugar workers. I invite them to sit with me, Vice President (Khemraj) Ramjattan, sit with Agriculture Minister, Noel Holder around the table to work out solutions,” he said.

Earlier in his address the Prime Minister had noted that on 6th January of this year that President David Granger had designated 13th March as Rose Hall Martyrs’ Day. He also reminded the attendees that today marks 253 years since 1764, when over 80 African revolutionaries were condemned to death and were executed in horrible ways.

Regional Chairman, David Armogan during his speech made mention of the fifteen indentured sugar workers who were shot and killed by colonial police. “The incident occurred about a half a mile from here, and it occurred because the indentured laborers refused to accept an illegitimate order from the manager to go and plant cane, when they were on the holiday period,” he reminded the gathering. “After a good production crop they were given four days of holiday, and it was during that four days they were called out to plant cane and they refused,” he said. “They were subsequently taken to court, and the magistrate requested that they be transferred to another estate. During that time when they were about to be arrested and moved to other estates; that other workers stood in solidarity with them, other indentured labourers, and so in the scuffle to arrest people who were deemed ring leaders... fifteen of

them were shot and killed, many of them young men.”

He stressed that two lessons are to be learnt from that situation, one being, even in those days peaceful resistance was carried out, and two, solidarity was always present between sugar workers from the beginning of time.

He noted that most descendants of past workers whose “sweat, blood and tears” are on the soil of Rose Hall Estate continue to carry forth the legacy, and are attached to different departments at the said estate. “They depend upon this estate to earn a living and a livelihood,” he observed. Once again he called upon the Government of Guyana to prioritise the people of the Region and the county at large, before closing any more sugar factories. Armogan warned that if Rose Hall Estate, and, or, Skeldon Estate is to be closed, the people of the Region will suffer tremendously.

Minister of Public Security, Ramjattan, stated that commemorations of sugar workers are “bittersweet occasions”, since they are reminders of the cruel conditions under which the country’s ancestors were labourers.”They remind us of the sacrifices which were made to secure the improvements of their working conditions, their living conditions and their rights.”

He noted that while hearts are pained by memories of the sugar workers who lost their lives in the struggle, citizens should remember to be inspired by the heroism displayed by the sugar workers. “Their sacrifice laid the foundation for the enjoyment of greater dignity by workers. This must never be forgotten,” Minister Ramjattan noted.

Dr. Fred Sukdeo, a grandson of Rose Hall Martyr Nibur, also spoke and gave a synopsis of the events of March 13th, 1913. In his address he provided the names of the martyrs; Badri, Bholay, Durga, Gafur, Jugai, Juggo, Hulas, Lalji, Motey Khan, Nibur, Roopan, Sadulla, Sarjoo, Sohan and Gobindei, the only woman.

The commemoration event which included the laying of wreaths at the monument was also attended by the Indian High Commissioner Venkatachalam Mahalingam, Minister of Agriculture, Noel Holder, Minister of Public Telecommunications, Cathy Hughes, Minister of Social Cohesion, Dr. George Norton, Minister within the Ministry of Public Health, Dr. Karen Cummings, Minister within the Ministry of Finance, Jaipaul Sharma, Regional Education Officer, Volika Jaikishun, Region Executive Officer, Kim Stephens, Members of Parliament, Rose Hall Estate Manager, Hutton Griffith, other officials and school children from various Primary and High schools in the Region.