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AT THE
137TH IPU ASSEMBLY
ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIAN FEDERATION
OCTOBER, 2017

*Contribution to the General Debate on Promoting Cultural Pluralism
and peace through Inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue*

Madam President,
President Chowdhury,
Secretary-General Martin Chungong
Fellow Parliamentarians

I sincerely thank the Honourable Speaker for sharing with me the time allotted to the Guyana delegation to address this IPU Assembly.

As both a South American and a Caribbean state, Guyana invites you to spare a kind thought for countries in our region which have been ravaged by recent hurricanes and earthquakes. Our peoples of various nationalities, different ethnicities and multiple cultures, especially those in small-island Caribbean states, are threatened by the effects of global warming and consequential climate change.

Guyana is a typical “salad bowl” of diverse ethnicities, cultures and traditions which still face challenges from its colonial legacy of inter-ethnic strife and division. But over 50 years of our independence, we experienced an uneasy peace not from conflicts within, but from the threat from outside, from our neighbour, Venezuela, whose government has rejected as final and binding the 1899 Arbitral Treaty that settled our respective borders, under international law.

This controversy threatens the development of Guyana as well as the stability of the Caribbean region, as a Zone of Peace. It requires us to promote the closest bonds between the peace-loving peoples of both Guyana and Venezuela.

Our Parliament is here today to share our experiences and to learn as well, from the examples of others in promoting cultural pluralism.

In Guyana our Parliament and the Judiciary are independent from the Executive. Both the Parliament and the judiciary enjoy full financial autonomy. Our Parliament functions under a bi-partisan, Parliamentary Management Committee, under the chairmanship of the Speaker.

Both Government and the parliamentary opposition are united in promoting our cultural pluralism through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue, even when we disagree on legislative or fiscal issues.

When Guyana became independent in 1966, our nation fashioned an aspiration in its motto: “one people, one nation, one destiny”. Our Constitution defines the principal objective of the political system of the state as the establishment of an inclusionary democracy.

Entrenched provisions in our Constitution protect all fundamental human rights, including protection from discrimination on the ground of ethnicity, gender and religious/cultural differences.

After the 2015 elections, Guyana broke from rule by a single party, that invariably represented one or the other of our dominant ethnic constituencies described as Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese. For the first time, a broad six-party, multi-ethnic coalition was elected to office. This is a new beginning for our multi-ethnic democracy and we hope to broaden the social base of our governance system.

In 2015, a Ministry of Social Cohesion was established, primarily to encourage Guyanese to embrace our diversity, to resolve social conflicts through networking and collaboration and to promote equal opportunities that benefit all.

It seeks to use dialogue and to adopt measures to manage our diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, religious beliefs and sexual orientation.

Towards these objectives, hate speeches are statute barred, and incitement of racism that undermines ethnical harmony and the peace of our society is not protected by privilege in our Parliament.

For Guyana, a politically and culturally divided country is not an option at a time when our small, under-developed nation is at the cusp of new wealth from the recent discovery of immense oil and gas resources. Besides, some 80% of Guyana's territory is pristine rainforests that form part of the Guiana Shields. Guyana needs social cohesion and peace since its vast size and natural resources are

ideal for promoting a model, Green State not only for Guyanese but for all humanity.

Most citizens of Guyana follow three major religions – Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Guyana respects equally our different religions and ethnicities. Several auspicious days in the Christian, Hindu and Muslim religions are observed as National Holidays. Sittings of our National Assembly and Parliament commence with a universal prayer. At all National events, prayers are offered by a priest, a pandit and an imam.

In recognition of our indigenous peoples, Guyana celebrates Heritage Month every year, and significant historical events associated with the struggles and sacrifices of our many ethnic communities such as African Emancipation Day (August 1, 1838) and Indian Arrival Day (May 5, 1838) are observed as national holidays.

Mr. President and distinguished delegates, in Guyana, living together and harmoniously has become a national objective. Our multiculturalism is a celebration of our differences, which define us and represent our beauty as a “rainbow nation”.

Our faith-based and inter-ethnic social partners add a valuable dimension through dialogue to the process of promoting cultural pluralism and social harmony. They all emphasise positive values such as love for others, desire for peace and cooperation, respect for children, elders and women; and a quest for truth, justice, and fair-play. This is the Guyana story that I wanted to share, and I thank you for giving me this honour to do so.