



PUBLIC FORUM

CARICOM in the Hemisphere

Albert R. Ramdin

Ambassador Albert Ramdin was re-elected to a second five year term as Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) on the 24th March 2010. Previously, he served as Ambassador at Large and Special Adviser to the Government of the Republic of Suriname on Western Hemispheric Affairs. He has served in various diplomatic capacities on behalf of both the Republic of Suriname, including as Permanent Representative to the OAS (1997-1999), and the OAS itself. In 1999, he joined the CARICOM Secretariat as Assistant Secretary-General for Foreign and Community Relations, where he was responsible for the coordination of the foreign policy of CARICOM and the strengthening of relations among its member states. Ambassador Ramdin has a particular interest in Haiti, and has spent much of the past ten years working to help the people and government of Haiti build and consolidate peace and stability in their country. As Assistant Secretary General of the OAS, one of his primary objectives is to guide the institution into a broader and more structured global dialogue and cooperation, whereby the OAS can share with other regions its experience in peace-building, democratization, development and competitiveness.

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This article is the result of a roundtable discussion with Ambassador Ramdin, which took place at the Institute of International Relations in October 2013. An edited version of the Assistant Secretary General's presentation is followed by a series of questions from the audience and his answers.

PRESENTATION

I wish to speak of how CARICOM is currently placed and is positioning itself with regard to changes in the hemisphere, as well as globally. In this respect, I see three processes simultaneously affecting the Region:

1. CARICOM, as a grouping of countries, is not as uniform as it was intended to be. The scope of the integration process has changed. The important question is: have we accepted this fact? And are we adjusting our policies in line with this reality among ourselves and with the outside world?
2. Regarding the expansion of CARICOM's membership, there is, obviously, now a different environment from what previously obtained. Suriname has brought a new history and language into the integration process, as well as a new legal system. French-speaking Haiti, with a population that exceeds all of CARICOM combined, has also brought many new aspects to CARICOM. Additionally, the presence of the Dominican Republic, which is seeking membership of CARICOM, means that within this relatively small geographical area, we will have four competing languages: Spanish, French, English and Dutch. Given this enormous diversity, the challenge is how do we create unity? I wonder if we are ready to accept this as a reality and how this will play out in terms of building consensus, unity, and the various interests to be served.
3. There is another new dimension: certain countries see the need and have the opportunity to go faster in the economic development process. While it is a sensitive issue, the fact remains that there are many countries in the region that can go faster than others. The question is: how does the integration movement respond to this? Are we going to allow this new dynamic to develop or are we going to request that those countries wait until the other members are ready? Or are we going to find a compromise? These are difficult questions that ought to be raised and discussed at the political level. There are solutions that can be found that could benefit all the members.

All of these three issues and the questions raised speak to why we appear to lack internal coherence, as exemplified by the delay in the implementation of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy

(CSME) and the problems with coordinating foreign policy on certain issues, among other things.

But what of the external dynamics and their effect on the Region? At the global level, things have changed dramatically, so much so that we have lost our geo-political significance with the end of the Cold War, the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). This external environment continues to change and we do not know if we are to expect a multipolar or a bipolar world, or even a unipolar world.

In the context of the Hemisphere, multilateral diplomacy has changed tremendously in many ways.

While the process is ongoing, it is having an impact on CARICOM. Multilateral diplomacy in the Hemisphere has been uplifted to the level of the Heads of State and Government. Before the 1990s, multilateral diplomacy was generally played out at the level of foreign ministers and ambassadors. Leaders did not meet often. Since 1994 however, when the First Summit of the Americas took place, we have seen leaders become the principal players in shaping foreign policy in the Hemisphere. Since then, there has been an increasing number of meetings of leaders in the Hemisphere, which has completely changed the dynamics of multilateral diplomacy in the Hemisphere.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has also changed the nature of diplomacy. The very job description of ambassadors and diplomats has changed. Previously, they had 2-3 days with which to respond to a communication. Today, a response is required instantaneously.

In addition, there are many more and different kinds of consultative mechanisms. There are existing sub-regional integration systems like CARICOM, the Central American Integration System (SICA) and the Andean Community; there are relatively new integration and cooperation schemes such as the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). And, of course, we have the OAS as the principal hemispheric institution.

More recently, new groupings have arisen that are having an impact on the Region. Firstly, Petrocaribe, as a mechanism of economic cooperation, has created sub-groupings within traditional groups because of development alignments or economic opportunities. Now, we are witnessing the promotion of Petrocaribe as an economic zone. Then, there is the Bolivarian

Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), more or less a political consultative body, and similarly, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

How then should CARICOM position itself in these political consultative mechanisms to strengthen its standing as a trusted international partner?

In the context of taking a new look at the integration process, there is a major change which, in the coming 5-10 years, will draw a lot more attention. Within CARICOM, we now have at least three Member States who have become full members of other sub-regional integration mechanisms. These are Suriname and Guyana in UNASUR, and Belize as a full-fledged member of SICA. This in itself may be fine, given that everyone wants good relations with their neighbours. The complication, however, that will arrive in the next 5-10 years is that they have obligated themselves to new treaties/agreements. Which treaty or obligation will prevail if there is a conflict with the CARICOM treaty? These issues have not been fully discussed.

The integration process may be at risk of being fractured. Opportunities that the region should have as a unit could be fragmented. CARICOM is going through exciting times but with a lot of difficult situations to be discussed and decided on, in terms of how to move forward. This is what I see as the most important challenge for CARICOM: how to adjust to the new reality and make the decision to make it a sound platform for common positions, collective action and coordinated policy making, especially in the context of larger bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the WTO and the OAS.

There are also issues in the Caribbean of pressing concern that CARICOM needs to take a leadership position on. Haiti is one of them. As a Region of 15 member states, almost half of the OAS membership, CARICOM is regarded as a very important grouping in the Western Hemisphere because of our votes and because of what we bring to the table.

CARICOM countries have strongly influenced hemispheric foreign policy. Over the last 5-10 years, since assuming my current position, I have seen more interest towards the Caribbean in matters which extend beyond the Region. One of the most important documents in the OAS history, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, would not have been of the quality it is, had CARICOM not insisted, in 2001, on extensive improvements to the draft.

CARICOM therefore has the ability to influence changes in the Western Hemisphere, not only because of our votes, but also our assets, that is, the values we bring to the table: democracy, trade unionism, engagement with civil society, relatively good human rights records, governance in general. All these factors are critical because they open the door to leadership and assuming leadership is key, as it gives us the opportunity to influence things further. This is where I see CARICOM: using its influence to shape the Western Hemisphere. I think the Hemisphere is ready for CARICOM leadership. We enjoy a certain recognition, but we need more action. This can only happen when we achieve a better understanding of our own internal dynamics, as well as the external dynamics that affect us.

Q&A

Question #1:

My question regards the new theory of convergence, which the Foreign Minister of Trinidad and Tobago has been pushing. This has sprung a debate about what really is *Convergence Theory*, indicating a confusion regarding what the concept means. The Minister defined it as integration without borders. He implies that CARICOM has reached its limits regarding integration, and that if we want to move beyond that and acquire larger markets we may have to move outside the region and engage with other countries which are like-minded, such as Singapore. He notes that by focusing solely on CARICOM, we could very well be limiting the potential of member states to grow economically. What do you think of this? Is his argument a sustainable one?

Ambassador Ramdin

I had the opportunity to discuss with Mr Dookeran his ideas and his analysis. I agree with him that we need to respond to the challenges facing the Caribbean. Confining ourselves as an integration unit in the Caribbean Sea is not going to get us far. He may be right that for some countries, we have reached the ceiling of cooperation. What then is the response? What he calls convergence is extending our alliances and partnerships, as well as our markets. This is, however, not a uniform process. It is based on interests in the case of certain political objectives, as well as economic

opportunities. We have to accept the reality that we are looking at a different path of integration: integration not only among ourselves, but also within the global economy.

I strongly believe that, as a region, CARICOM cannot survive in the global scene without building and maintaining strong partnerships with natural allies. Natural allies can be European countries with whom we have a relationship. However, the EU doesn't have to be the only one. We have alliances within the neighbourhood and I am very much promoting a strong relationship between the Caribbean and Central America. I am therefore pleased to observe Trinidad and Tobago attempting to build alliances with Central America; it is the closest market which CARICOM members can penetrate relatively easy.

We need to accept the notion that integration is not only among ourselves. We need to expand our horizons, both politically and economically. Countries such as Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago have accepted this, and are looking south of the Hemisphere, as well as to Central America.

There is a new trend developing, a new type of trading arrangement, which we have not yet begun to discuss. I refer to non-geographically-based alliances such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). These are massive new trading blocs. Some countries in Central America have seen the benefits. Costa Rica, for example, is going to join the TPP. Within the margins of what is possible for smaller economies, we need to position ourselves to gain as much as possible from these new trade trends.

Convergence is an answer to the new challenges that emerge with these trends, not only in practical terms, but also conceptually. How do we now look at integration? It is not that we are going to stop coming closer together, it means that we will have to use many more avenues to reach the same goal. It will be a difficult process. Leadership in the region is going to be key, but leadership in a new version. Not just leadership among ourselves, but globally. During the Non-Aligned Movement, as an active bloc, CARICOM was very impressive in shaping the world in terms of what position to take. If we stop impressing the world, we will no longer count. We have to carve out a leadership niche again.

Question #2

Firstly, instead of fragmentation, one could see the possibility of CARICOM countries forming alliances with South and Central

America. We could have greater CARICOM engagement with these regional blocs. I see Suriname and Guyana stretching the boundaries of CARICOM. What would be your reaction to this? Secondly, we have observed recently the Guyana-Venezuela issue raising its head; do you think that the OAS could have a level of engagement up-front? What is the role of the organization in contributing to a peaceful resolution of this issue?

Ambassador Ramdin

On the first part of your question, I agree with you that becoming more integral in other integration systems in the Hemisphere does not necessarily mean there will be a negative impact on CARICOM integration. Suriname and Guyana can act as beachheads to CARICOM for the South. However, the reality is, in the context of the changes in international relations, as well as the way countries look at their positions globally, or hemispherically, if these countries do not adapt and advance their foreign policy to play this role, then the others will not wait.

We thought that countries that have long-standing relationships with emerging economies such as India and China, could have played the role of making the first entrance into those markets. It worked for a while and we now see ministerial meetings taking place on a regular basis. In the case of Central America and the Caribbean, there were two countries that could have played that role. The Dominican Republic, just over ten years ago wanted a strategic alliance between CARICOM and Central America, but no one acted upon it. Belize did what it could do by twice hosting CARICOM-Central American Heads of Governments. However, both those meetings ended in declarations which were not implemented.

At the OAS, we try to bring these two regions together: business personnel and company CEOs of both regions have been brought together. Their interactions are purely business-related. We want to do what we can to improve trade and business relations between the regions. And it is working. A lot of business is beginning to take place. This is a role that the OAS can play behind the scenes – and is playing – to foster a relationship, which for me is natural. It is natural because in many ways we are talking about similar economies, facing similar challenges.

CARICOM and Central America represent almost two-thirds of the membership of the OAS. What this means is that if we can

cooperate among ourselves, we can influence what happens in the wider Hemisphere and create great opportunities. We need to pursue this avenue stronger. The relationship between CARICOM and Central America is indeed growing, especially at the private sector level. We need to do more at the political level.

Regarding the question on the OAS and its role in conflict resolution, the OAS too, needs to adjust and adapt to new circumstances. It needs to also play a more pro-active role. It needs to engage with member states in earlier stages of potential conflicts. I admit that we do not do this enough although there are many conflicts taking place in the Hemisphere where we are engaged.

In the case of Venezuela and Guyana, the OAS is not ignoring the issue. We are monitoring it and, hopefully, the OAS will strengthen its role in engaging pro-actively. The OAS should also engage with Venezuela and Cuba much more. I do not believe in a policy of isolation and exclusion. My preference is more and earlier engagement with countries.

In the region, we need more positive, common agendas; agendas where we are sure to get results. This is one of the things I am promoting in the OAS: a common agenda that is focused on hemispheric unity. CARICOM is a good interlocutor for such a programme, because we are not controversial. We know what democracy means. We need to take this role and try to find ways to make this hemisphere peaceful on the basis of consensus and dialogue. This is a useful intervention in hemispheric politics today and I hope that the CARICOM Council for Foreign and Community Relations (COFCOR) will recognise this.

Question #3

Regarding all these developments in Latin America which are impacting on us in the Caribbean, and how we go about dealing them, as I see it, CARICOM is becoming a side-show. Half of CARICOM is paying more attention to Petrocaribe and ALBA than it is paying to CARICOM. Even the ministerial meetings in Petrocaribe are twice or three times as many as the ministerial meetings in CARICOM. When CARICOM meets, they basically discuss and rehash the same old issues. However, the resources that CARICOM members need are really coming from outside of CARICOM, largely from Venezuela's large oil resources. There is a dynamic that we are not paying much attention to, and we do not seem to be

equipped to do this. Take the CARICOM Secretariat as an example: it is not organized in a way to be able to make the necessary links to Petrocaribe, to UNASUR, to SICA, and so on. What is required is a cadre of people who feel comfortable to work with these other people (such as UNASUR and Petrocaribe).

I take note of the European Union: the first port of call that a German would make is when he/she calls the Secretariat Office or the Commission. He/she feels comfortable engaging in dialogue with the technocrats and others in these organizations who know his/her language and culture. In the CARICOM Secretariat, we have individuals who are isolated in what can be described as an 'Anglophone fox hole'. They do not come out and engage. They are unable to engage in dialogue with the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic. They do not understand the issues involved in properly bringing Haiti and the Dominican Republic together and promote Caribbean integration. Therefore, what we have are three or four countries: Guyana, Suriname, Belize and Trinidad and Tobago to some extent who want to push on, and then you have what you may call the 'Recalcitrant Rest', who seem afraid of the Dominican Republic, and the wider hemisphere. They are fearful that they would be swamped [with imports from these countries], and hence they refuse to move. Now, how do we move this forward? What are some of the likely developments that you see, that may push us forward?

Ambassador Ramdin

I always feel that we do not need to be a side-show. Regrettably, there is a perception that CARICOM became part of many alliances almost as an after-thought. This is not the way to have influence in the Hemisphere. So, how do we put ourselves in a position to become influential?

Firstly, I think we need a critical analysis of our position and vision to become influential in the global political economy. As Assistant Secretary General of CARICOM for Foreign and Community Relations, my job combined what was happening inside with the outside. It was therefore mandatory to build relations between CARICOM and the outside world, as well as to foster good relations among the members of CARICOM.

The question can be asked: how much of a community are we really, in terms of policy-making and consensus? Now, when I joined the CARICOM Secretariat, I advocated that our foreign policy

should have three characteristics; I believe that these are still applicable today:

1. It should be pro-active. We should determine what happens to us and how we respond. We should not be followers. I have great difficulty accepting that, after 40 years, CARICOM, in some instances, is exchanging one dependency for another.
2. Foreign policy ought to be analysis and intelligence-based. We should do impact studies.
3. We need strong execution. I believe that over time we have lost ground. When I was a member of the IIR Board, I proposed that the IIR should be the mechanism by which technical expertise is developed and where future diplomats are taught to speak from a Caribbean perspective, as opposed to having a consolidation of national opinions. Europe has developed two key areas after they started accelerating the integration process: European Legal Studies and European Diplomacy. They speak from the perspective of Europe. We need to speak more from the perspective of the Caribbean. Without this, the execution of our foreign policy is going to be difficult. Execution means putting in place the vision; putting in place those who have to carry out the message and those who will be positioned elsewhere in the world. This is how we will exert influence.

I think if CARICOM can identify more common areas in the foreign policy arena, we can strengthen the foundation for Caribbean foreign policy. Our representatives in the world need one generic brief from which to speak. I see quite often in the OAS different Caribbean countries coming with different briefs. We need a situation whereby the person who is representing Suriname speaks the same way about a particular issue as the person speaking for the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). This is the kind of environment we need to create as a region. It requires leadership to do this.

Question #4

You spoke about the fact that we need to have language play a much more dynamic role in the community. The way in which we handle and operationalize CARICOM in respect of this key aspect - of how we are going to build that one sense of self - leaves much to

be desired. There are a lot of programs that the OAS does, such as scholarships, which are targeted towards building our technical capacity; however, such interventions need to be more ground-based. Language is an excellent route to take in this regard. I think both the CARICOM Secretariat and the OAS need to be a lot more hands-on in terms of helping to instil a sense of innate belief that we are a community. How can this happen?

Ambassador Ramdin

Let me make it clear that I am very much a believer in the CARICOM integration process. I do not see another option. Besides, the world looks at us as CARICOM, not as individual countries. Therefore, I strongly support integration. However, we ought to look inwards and analyze properly from all angles.

At the OAS, I am from the Caribbean, but I speak equally for Caribbean countries as I do for Nicaragua and Bolivia and other countries in the Hemisphere. If we position ourselves only as the Caribbean, people will see us as such. I think we should demonstrate that we are capable of doing more. I serve thirty-four countries.

There is one element we should look at possibly, and this is the change in the way governance is taking place in the Hemisphere and in the Region. We have to involve other stakeholders in a sincere way, in a meaningful way. How often have regional leaders been able to engage in frank and constructive discussions with the private sector and with civil society? The days of the Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL) being in Heads of Government meetings are gone. I think the last meeting Heads engaged with civil society in a collective manner was in Barbados in 2002. We need to bridge the gap between those who make policy and those who are supposed to take ownership and execute those policies. The gap between government and civil society is widening and this needs to change. I believe that we need to engage in a new process of innovative governance, which allows us to deeply engage with civil society and the private sector.

If we look at the CARICOM integration process, I think what is lacking is a more appropriate governance structure. We do not have a Caribbean Parliament. This means there are no checks and balances in terms of execution. These are critical factors in building a sub-regional democracy. I think that in the process of reflecting on the integration movement, we certainly should look at the

possibility of a Caribbean Parliament. Not the Association of Caribbean Community Parliamentarians (ACCP); I am speaking of a parliament elected by the Caribbean people to monitor whether mandates agreed by Heads are being carried out. These are the kinds of innovations I am speaking of.

In terms of language, while I strongly support an initiative so that we become part of the Hemisphere by learning Portuguese, Dutch, French and Spanish, the OAS provides scholarships whereby recipients have an opportunity to do immersion courses. Countries such as Mexico and Brazil are very supportive of this. There are many scholarships, but countries do not push them, so the up-take is very low. It is something we are going to promote. But certainly, language is one way we will get to know each other and build trust.

Question #5

How committed are political leaders to integration? And how does this impact on the thinking of the technocracy? Technocrats, even if they are thinking for themselves, at a certain point must find resonance in the leadership of countries, and if this is not there, then nothing happens. I sometimes sense that if you go to a CARICOM Heads of Government meeting, sometimes you wonder if everyone is present at a particular point in time, and, therefore, whether out of those who are actually present, we can have a committed and cohesive conclusion. I am prone to thinking sometimes that a lot of the time when Heads come to conferences there are other things on their minds. So, in the absence of consensus, there is no mechanism to force the majority view to a decision.

Ambassador Ramdin

The global financial crisis and also the sub-regional challenges faced by many leaders distract them from CARICOM issues. This is a reality I do not want to ignore. Leaders have day-to-day issues to deal with. This is not going to change. The world is moving and lots of countries have the same challenges. We just have to work on several areas at the same time. You are quite right. When leaders go to a meeting, they take part of the domestic agenda with them. Maybe I am wrong, but I imagine that the founding fathers of the integration movement also had some of these challenges (employment, housing, social services etc.), but their vision

extended beyond the next election. Today, leaders are forced to think 'next election'. Maybe when CARICOM Heads meet, they should not have 15 items on the agenda, but maybe 3-4 items that are geared more towards strategic issues. The other items can be dealt with at the level of ministers.

I want to go back to another issue. Certain countries in the region have fewer opportunities. But I think that all countries do have opportunities. If some have fewer, those who can go faster have to ensure that those who cannot move fast are not left behind. The EU went through this process. They created mechanisms by which to provide support to parts of Italy and Spain to get them up to a level of economic development to make them a functioning part of the system. CARICOM needs such an element of solidarity in the integration process.

Question number #6

What are the key issues preventing what we could call the 'United States of the Caribbean'?

Question number #7

You began by indicating that the presumed homogeneity of CARICOM is waning, and that perhaps a domestic urgency interferes with that vision. Whereas one can appreciate that the global impulse is towards deeper integration, there is also a political necessity to align oneself with entities that seem more promising or more rewarding in terms of one's political or even monetary investment. In your own commentary, you recognize the dilemma that perhaps in forming of some of those new relations, countries may very well find themselves jeopardizing their relationships with traditional allies.

I found it rather interesting that you seem to suggest that there is one definition of democracy, not two or three. This is curious, because even in terms of one's alliances and extended alliances, you find yourself in a diluted pot, and you wonder what that cohesive, ideological element is. Has it become so diluted, that political expediency is the order of the day, more than the very things our visionaries have anticipated in terms of coming together, banding together and having a common ideology and purpose? Have we missed the boat, or are we looking to pull back when the time seem to have long gone?

I am throwing all of these things out to find out: where do we begin? How do we pull back? How do we re-assess? Have we gone too far off of our pivot? Is there any regaining of that posture, and that dynamism and unison of purpose that we seemed to have had?

Ambassador Ramdin

I do not think we have missed the boat. We have just not adjusted enough to circumstances. I believe in the integration process. It is a mechanism which is going to be the only way in which we get recognition as a force. Of course, we need to take a new look at the foundation upon which it is built. It doesn't mean leaving anyone behind. It is about creating balance within the system. We need a debate on how we are going to do this. What we had aspired to in the past may have been achieved to some extent, but we are moving into the next level of integration and development.

We need to be not aligning ourselves with one or the other. We need to draw our own line and be pragmatic. At least two countries in the hemisphere have used this strategy: Brazil and El Salvador. Brazil has been engaging with global powers and has been finding solutions and engaging outside of the US and the EU. They have still maintained a strong relationship with the US. You do not have to lose a relationship because you have engaged in another. However, it depends on how you position yourself in that relationship. El Salvador has good relations with almost all countries. We can do this too.

Ideology does not bring development today, what brings development is pragmatism. No country has a fixed ideological framework of development anymore. When I speak about democracy, I speak about having one understanding. In the Caribbean, there is one understanding of democracy. And this is a good thing, because it defines our governance structure, our state institutions and the functioning of society as a whole.

Regarding a 'United States of the Caribbean', there was an article a few months ago by the former Minister of Tourism of the Bahamas. He spoke at length, asking the same question: what if there was a 'United States of the Caribbean'? I believe that it is a nice theory, but would be extremely difficult to achieve in reality. But I also believe that the spirit of a 'United States of the Caribbean' can exist, that is, the solidarity principle. The rest will take time.

There is a lot of common ground that can be found in the positions of CARICOM nations. Often I think we tend to forget all

that we have achieved. CARICOM has indeed done a lot in terms of institutional framework, policy making and large initiatives. However, in the area of diplomacy and international relations, we need to do a lot more. This will require the Secretariat to become a more active participant in the process, not as a mandate-following institution, but a mandate-creating institution. What is happening right now is that when a situation arises, governments decide and then give the executors a mandate. I believe the situation should be in reverse. Executors should come up with possible scenarios, present them to governments, who then choose the way forward.

Question #8

Regarding the treatment by the Dominican Republic of people of Haitian descent, what is the OAS planning to do?

Question #9

The sort of energy and expertise that has been accumulated within the OAS architecture is certainly something that we in the Caribbean have not been drawing down on. I am hoping that the recently released Landell-Mills Report that points directly at the surgical approach to building capacity within the CARICOM Secretariat has traction. If we have to move forward, we need to have a robust Secretariat in the sense of a pool of resources and expertise out of which will devolve policy direction and all that is needed for the unification that is to take place politically and economically. We can use this as a launching pad towards all the other outward regionalism that we find ourselves in.

We are not in a position, because of a weak Secretariat, to really benefit from the very robust and rich inter-American architecture that we participate in. Unless we take early steps to build that robustness within CARICOM, we will always find ourselves short-changed. I am hoping that, through the IIR, and through fine-tuning our diplomatic skills and having a truly Caribbean think-tank of sorts, we can use this to build the Secretariat and reach ourselves into other groupings.

Ambassador Ramdin

In terms of the points made about the OAS and expertise there and how it could help CARICOM, the OAS Secretariat is available to

share and to help build capacity. We have done so in many countries and have had a reasonably strong impact on governance capacities. In terms of the CARICOM Secretariat and the report you referred to, maybe I am too optimistic, but I do not believe in changes made incrementally. I believe it is time to start looking at a complete overhaul.

However, before we talk about structure and staffing – and I have a lot of respect for the individuals working at the CARICOM Secretariat - we need to talk about the vision of CARICOM. What is CARICOM's future path? Is it going to be a strong integration system with agreed common objectives? Or is it going to be a collection based on convenience and geography? These are the difficult questions that should be answered firstly. Having answered these questions, we will then be able to decide what kind of governance structure we need.

The West Indian Commission Report of 1992 still has valid ideas, which were not carried out. I am not saying that every report should be carried out to the letter but there were major governance recommendations in it

In terms of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the situation has the OAS's full attention. The relationship between the two countries needs to continue at a high political level, as well as at the technical level of border commissions and so on. I am very involved in this. I am chairman of the Haiti Task Force in the OAS, as well as the Haiti Group of Friends. I am in constant discussion with both sides, not only on this particular issue.

The decision of the Supreme Court of the Dominican Republic puts the government in a difficult spot. This includes other arms of government, such as the parliament. In terms of the rule of law and the separation of powers, the decision of the judiciary stands. It does not mean however, that we should do nothing, for we then run the risk of 240,000 or more Haitians becoming stateless. The UN does not allow for this, neither does the OAS. Therefore we are very much involved from the perspective of human rights and from the perspective of the right to identity and nationality. We are urging the government of the Dominican Republic to find a way forward. What can be done by the president is to seek legislation to regularize these individuals, which the congress will have to approve, but the political system in the Dominican Republic is very complex.

We are in touch with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as with the UN. We have been working on

the ground with several groups to foster an environment for action by the government of the Dominican Republic. The opinions of the Haitian government are taken on board. I brought the Ambassadors of Haiti and the Dominican Republic together with the president of the IOM. We need to seek practical solutions to the issue. It will not be an easy process, given the history of the two countries, but we hope that in the coming days, the situation will drastically improve.

Question #10

If there is one thing that touches the Caribbean states it is our ocean. I know that the OAS has been doing quite a lot, but the move to get the Caribbean Sea declared as a zone of sustainable development has not received too much success. What is the OAS doing in terms of a new agenda or strategy that will feature ocean development as a strategy?

There has been a lot of talk recently about Panama's intent to expand the Panama Canal. We see, too, that Nicaragua has given thought to cutting a channel through their country. Jamaica has the intention, we hear, to enter into an arrangement with the Chinese to build a mega-port. Trinidad and Tobago also unveiled plans to expand its maritime sector, which will expand its port facilities. Everyone is talking about being in a position to capitalize on the expansion of trade given the larger ships that are coming on board. To what extent is the OAS paying attention to this? Countries could very well be paying attention to resources that are non-existent. To what extent could we advise them to rationalize their efforts in terms of what they are doing?

Ambassador Ramdin

Regarding the Panama Canal, and the Nicaragua idea, Panama is much further ahead in their plans. The expansion is already being executed. I think it is a good thing that Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago are preparing themselves for trans-shipment, because new facilities will be needed and they are logical options. Getting the ports ready requires a high level of investment. But there is another aspect. It is not just about trans-shipment.

A lot of ships will need to be repaired and this is a different kind of economy being developed. We are involved in this so much so that our Ports Committee meets with all the port authorities

regularly. We are very much on top of these developments. Our Ports Committee is very private sector oriented. They receive very little money from us and are funded by the ports and by port organizations. I see this as a good thing. Regarding the wider context in terms of sea and connecting the region, the ACS was mandated to take the lead on this. The OAS cannot do everything.

In connecting the Caribbean, we need more sea route connections. If we want to develop trade between Central America and the Caribbean, we need to develop these. We can develop products to sell but cannot transport them. This is a much more immediate problem. We need more sea and air routes.

Question #11

Regarding the United States of the Caribbean, I see the possibility of this occurring. For example we have the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ). We have the West Indies Cricket Team. We have the Caribbean Council of Churches, the Islamic Missionary Guild, and so on. So I can see a possibility of having what we might call the United States of CARICOM. You mention about being practical, I appreciate this very much. There is one group of people who are probably wealthier than governments, who play the role of leadership, peace-keeping, have an active role in politics, whether seen or unseen, active role in race relations, an active role as political advisors, as well as an active role in preventing conflict. These particular groups are religious organizations. We may categorize them as civil societies. Why do you think this particular group of religious organizations has not been included more, even for example in the Haiti situation? What role do you see religious organizations playing in the OAS?

Ambassador Ramdin

I am also optimistic about a United States of the Caribbean; and also about the role of religious organizations in society in general. In many countries, religious organizations and especially inter-religious organizations have been very, very important. Religious organizations have what I would call the moral authority and persuasion to help out. They know when to retreat and when to become active. I think they are critical. They are seen not as an interest group, but as a group for the common good. They are also

almost always gearing towards peaceful resolution. They definitely should play a more active role in the region.

In the case of Haiti, I have been involved since 2000 and we have worked closely with religious organizations in the past. In that country, even as it gets closer to elections, you see religious organizations mobilizing in order to influence not the outcome but dialogue on building trust between the political parties, the president and the parliament.

I think in CARICOM, undoubtedly, if there is a collectivity of inter-religious organizations it would be a good counterpart to the governments to discuss pressing issues affecting long term development; issues such as crime and violence, as well as values. So yes, religious organizations have a positive role as major stakeholders in the region.