

Guyana's population at risk

By RON FANFAIR



Close to 40 per cent of Guyana's population could be displaced if urgent repairs are not carried out to the East Demerara Water Conservancy Dam before the May-June rainy season starts, warns a Canadian politician.

Federal Member of Parliament, Jim Karygiannis, spent two days in the South American country last week assessing the damage caused by recent severe flooding.

Accompanied by Special Assistant Margot Doey-Vick and Guyanese-born, Toronto-based community worker Eden Gajraj, Karygiannis visited some of the worst-hit areas on the East Coast of Demerara and met with several top-ranking government officials, including President Bharrat Jagdeo.

He also held discussions with the Chief Executive Officer of the National Drainage and Irrigation Board, Ravi Narine, who briefed the Scarborough-Agincourt Liberal MP on the fragility of the 60-kilometre peat and clay dam that Dutch engineers constructed almost 150 years ago.

"From what I saw and what I was told, the dam is very fragile and immediate work is needed to be done before a very serious disaster, worse than the recent flooding, happens that could push the Guyana coastline approximately 20 miles inland," said Karygiannis.

"Time and the recent severe flooding have left the walls of the conservancy dam in a very weakened state and vulnerable to the ravages of the upcoming rainy season."

Karygiannis, whose visit to Guyana was endorsed by Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, will make a report on his trip to the PM, International Co-operation Minister Aileen Carroll and Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew.

He said an estimated US\$3.5 million is needed right away to fix the problem.

"The Americans and the British have already stepped to the plate and I will recommend to the PM that we contribute US\$1.5 million through the Canadian International Development Agency."

A United Nations Disaster Assessment and Co-ordination team -- which visited Guyana last month - and Dutch experts conclude that upgrading the dam will require large volumes of clay and sand to be transported and placed on a soft sub-soil at a cost that could reach as high as US\$500 million.

They said that breaches in the dam could result in the release of close to 100 billion gallons of water that could cause massive flooding in heavily populated coastal areas from Georgetown to Mahaica.

In the short term, they have recommended dredging of the draining channels, construction of extra channels and the addition of culverts as part of the rehabilitation of the existing hydraulic system.

Karygiannis says he hopes his visit to Guyana will highlight the serious problems the country

could face if the dam is breached.

"Just think about the possibility of half the population losing everything and having no place to live in addition to possible loss of lives," added Karygiannis. "I don't really think too many people here in Canada understand the gravity of the situation.

"Canada and Guyana have enjoyed healthy bilateral co-operation over the past 40 years and this country is home to thousands of Guyanese. My reason for going to Guyana was simply to get a better feel and understanding of the situation and relay that to the relevant Canadian authorities for action."

Canada-Guyana relations was further advanced three weeks ago with the conclusion of the first air transport agreement between the two countries that will result in enhanced transportation options for air travellers and shippers.

Each country can now allocate to its designated airlines four weekly flights for passenger service and three weekly cargo flights. Prior to this agreement, air service between the two countries operated on a charter basis.

Since the flooding in Guyana began in mid-January, Canada has provided close to Can\$340,000 for emergency needs to the affected areas. The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives provided \$140,000 to help local non-governmental organizations and the Guyana government proceed with reconstruction and recovery.

Canada, through the Canadian Red Cross and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, also gave \$200,000 to ensure that 30,000 people gained access to clean water, sanitation and other basic necessities for the next six months.

Prior to going to Guyana, Karygiannis made a private trip to Sri Lanka in late January to observe the extent of the destruction caused by the tsunami.

"When I came back from Sri Lanka, Eden (Gajraj) approached me and said we had to do something to get the word out there about what's happening in Guyana," recalled Karygiannis who is also the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport. "I did not hesitate to answer the call because a significant number of Guyanese live in my riding.

"I also think it was important for me to remind people in Guyana that we have not forgotten them because of other priorities such as the tsunami."

Gajraj, a long-time Liberal activist, said the water has subsided and life is slowly returning to normal in the wake of the flood that claimed 20 lives.
