

Remarks by the Hon. Said W. Musa

Prime Minister, Minister of Education and Minister for

the Public Service of Belize

To the Opening Ceremony of the 24th Regular Meeting of

the Conference of Heads of Government of the

Caribbean Community

Montego Bay, Jamaica

2nd July 2003

(Please check against delivery)

Most Honourable Percival J. Patterson, Prime Minister
of Jamaica and Chairman of the Caribbean Community,

Your Excellency Thabo Mbeki, President of South
Africa and Chairman of the African Union,

Colleague Heads of Government of the Caribbean
Community,

Honourable Ministers of Governments, Members of
Parliaments and other elected officials,

Secretaries-General Carrington, Gavisia, Girvan and
McKinnon

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I thank you for giving me the opportunity as a newly re-
elected Prime Minister to address this distinguished
gathering on so auspicious an occasion, the thirtieth
anniversary of the founding of the Caribbean Community.

The mandate my government was given by the people of Belize includes, importantly, the maintenance and deepening of our commitment to the Caribbean Community, and our presence here is designed to take major steps to accomplish this objective.

Belize is and feels itself an integral part of CARICOM, whose principled support for our sovereignty and territorial integrity has been critical to our survival and development. Our contribution as headquarters to the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism and now the Caribbean Centre for Climate Change helps us to fulfill our designated responsibility to the community for sustainable development and the environment. We must all work harder to create the air and sea transportation infrastructure that will make integration more meaningful for all of us.

The theme for this meeting is “Integration – Our Key to Prosperity”. We are now embarked on a course to create a Single Market and Economy –the CSME- designed to improve the quality of life of our peoples, diminish inequalities and move resolutely towards the elimination of poverty by the creation of meaningful employment for all and the provision of human security in the widest sense of the term.

To do this, we must expand production, support our traditional industries, diversify and grow our economies, stimulate greater investment and exports to expanded markets in an environment of open and fair trade.

None of us can do this alone, which is why we created and have nurtured CARICOM, and why we must now strengthen our Community.

As CARICOM, we have ongoing structured collaboration with regional partners including Mexico, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela and we are pursuing ways to further our cooperation with Cuba, the French and Dutch Antilles and Puerto Rico. The establishment of the Association of Caribbean States has provided us with a platform from which to forge a larger zone of cooperation in the Greater Caribbean.

Belize's membership of the Central American Integration System (SICA) provides CARICOM with a unique opportunity to forge closer economic, trade and political relations with our Central American neighbours, who are also part of this great Caribbean community of peoples.

As of yesterday, Belize assumed the presidency of SICA, and during our six-month tenure we will do everything possible to strengthen economic and security cooperation between CARICOM and Central America.

Our most urgent task today is to build a successful, enduring and effective single market and economy. Because this has to be done within the context of the international climate in which we must operate, the challenge is daunting; but it is not insurmountable.

This meeting occurs at a time marked by heightened uncertainty on the international stage. The increasing resort to unilateralism by the powerful players on the world's stage is testing the very fabric of our Caribbean cohesiveness. In this context, it is supremely important for the very survival of our Community that we remain resolutely united in purpose and action.

For a decade we have been promoting concepts related to the need to create a human-oriented trade regime that took account of the special circumstances of small and disadvantaged states and that put people first. We were voices crying in the wilderness, deemed heretics to the religion of free trade fundamentalism, but we persisted, and now a major UNDP study, “Making Global Trade Work for People”, provides ample justification to the justice of our position.

The study argues for special and differential treatment for developing countries going beyond traditional trade issues to embrace education, health, gender equality, environmental protection, respect for cultural diversity and other human development matters. It urges that WTO rules, made more flexible and development-oriented, should provide the parameters for regional negotiations.

This requires CARICOM to urgently reassess the sequencing of its economic negotiations, by first ensuring acceptable arrangements in the WTO.

Agriculture remains the economic mainstay for most of our peoples, providing a livelihood for some 70% of our regional population. It is beyond irony that in the name of free trade, this livelihood is threatened even as the rich and powerful countries provide agricultural subsidies to their farmers to the tune of over one billion dollars a day. This is not a dying phenomenon; indeed, since 1997 such subsidies have increased by over 25 percent. This attack on the domestic food production of developing countries has major repercussions for food security, social cohesion and women's income, employment and status.

We must have increased market access, especially to the European and North American markets, where subsidies and the consequent dumping practices are long overdue for elimination.

Mr. Chairman and colleagues, distinguished delegates and guests: this meeting will be historic not for looking back over thirty years but for building the foundation for a better future.

We will take steps that will lead to the creation of the implementation machinery and governance structures to make the CSME an effective instrument for expanding markets, disseminating knowledge by increased exposure to new technologies, facilitating competition, stimulating gains in productivity, improving our investment potential.

The Caribbean Court of Justice is one such vital institution, and my government is committed to make this our final appellate court.

The time may well have come, too, to create a Caribbean Commission, as proposed a decade ago by the West India Commission, with clear and specific mandates to implement the tasks set for it by the Conference of Heads and other organs of the Community.

But none of this will mean anything to our peoples if it is only a few who can benefit from these opportunities. People are the real wealth of nations, and the main goal of development must be to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy an expanded range of choices and forge a better quality of life for themselves, their families, their communities. We must equip our citizens, especially our more disadvantaged people, with the knowledge and opportunities necessary to take advantage of the potential of the CSME.

Every decision we make, every action we take, must redound to the positive benefit of the people we represent. We must involve civil society in our decision-making and seek a dynamic partnership with the private sector and trade union representatives.

Integration has been CARICOM's best hope for survival. As we continue to advance this great work we must ensure that the structures we build and the results we achieve are indeed designed to improve the welfare of the Caribbean man and woman.