

## ERIC MARGOLIS



# Guyana's grief

Guyana, which is sandwiched between Venezuela, Brazil and Surinam, may look on the map like a part of South America. But in character this vibrant nation of 900,000 blacks and East Indians is very much part of the formerly British, and now independent West Indies.

Along Guyana's coast, where almost everyone lives, the charm and gentility of West Indian life is evident. But, in its wild, mineral-rich interior, Guyana becomes part of the vast jungle and river systems of the Orinoco and Amazon.

Today, many Guyanese and other West Indians share a deepening concern that the jungle of South American politics is fast encroaching on what remains of Guyana's British legacy of democracy and the rule of law.

West Indians, whose history is older than that of North America, take their democracies very seriously. In a world filled with dictatorships, the islands of the Commonwealth Caribbean offer a welcome contrast of personal freedom, reasonably fair elections and honest courts. West Indians of all persuasions demanded the ouster of Grenada's Marxist regime precisely because these thugs had violated the norms of freedom and decency.

A similar, though less oppressive regime, now rules Guyana. Formerly Britain's second most important West Indian colony after Jamaica, Guyana's democratic traditions have fallen victim to leftist ideology and the frequently bloody political-racial struggles between blacks and East Indians.

Guyana has not had much luck with its political leaders. After independence, Cheddi Jagan, a pro-communist East Indian dentist, gained power. While studying in the U.S., Jagan met and married an American Marxist, one of those typically ferocious female leftists who hunt the halls of academia for unmarried Third Worlders. Jagan returned to Guyana, determined to present his bride with a new people's republic.

## Turned off by honeymoon

This honeymoon soon enraged the U.S. which promptly assigned one of its agencies to help promote a long series of strikes that resulted in the fall of Jagan and his replacement, in 1982, by the black leader, Forbes Burnham. Unfortunately for both the U.S. and Guyana, Burnham was also an ardent leftist.

Once in power, Burnham rigged the electoral process so that his People's National Congress was assured of permanent power. And while the blacks and East Indians were battling with each other — occasionally burning down the capital, Georgetown, in the process — the nation's economy, dependent on sugar and bauxite, slides into a steady, long-term decline as world demand for these commodities dropped.

As the economy worsened and local opposition mounted, Burnham resorted increasingly to the police, party goons and members of a local religious cult, the "House of Israel," to intimidate and bully his opponents. Nor did the bizarre episode of the Jonestown massacre or a farcical attempted coup by a bunch of drunken American ranchers do anything to improve Guyana's image abroad.

Foreign investors, essential for developing Guyana's mineral and timber resources, were put off by the nation's violent ethnic squabbles, Burnham's leftward trend, and Venezuela's claims to a sizable portion of Guyana's interior.

Burnham's strong flirtation with Russia and Cuba has made Washington and Venezuela quite unhappy. There are persistent reports that Soviet and Cuban security and military advisers are active in Guyana. It is also widely known that Russia intended to build a little Caribbean entente upon the Marxist regimes of Grenada, Surinam, and Guyana — a plan that failed when the U.S. invaded Grenada.

## Washington curtails aid

Today, Burnham is considered "hostile" by Washington; as a result, U.S. aid has been curtailed and much-needed loans from the World Bank and IMF delayed or blocked. Having seen what happened in Grenada, Burnham is keeping a low profile, reportedly at the urging of his Cuban advisers.

Just as Brazil brought pressure on Guyana's neighbor, Surinam, to expel its Cuban "advisers," so Venezuela is now "influencing" Burnham to distance himself from Moscow and Havana. The newly elected leaders of democratic Venezuela are quite aware that Russia considers Guyana a key strategic gateway into South America. The Venezuelans have made it clear that they will not tolerate overtly Marxist regimes in either Guyana or Trinidad.

Venezuela is also influencing Guyana by toning down its claims to Guyana's mineral-rich Essequibo region; but should Burnham pursue his leftward course, these claims could be easily pressed, with unfortunate results for the Guyanese.

The rapid rise of political repression in Guyana, including many jailings, beatings and a few assassinations, has led some exiled Guyanese groups to take more militant action. Shortly before Christmas, a number of East Indian Guyanese were caught red-handed by the FBI and RCMP with a truckload of arms, reportedly destined for a coup attempt against Burnham.

We can probably expect more of this sort of action. Opposition to Burnham and his goon squads is centred in Toronto, where many Guyanese groups are active. If Burnham continues his leftward drift, it is not improbable that the U.S. and Venezuela may find in Toronto the leadership of a new Guyanese government.

Most West Indians and many Guyanese would breathe a great sigh of relief if Guyana were rid of the twin curses of Jagan and Burnham.