

P.J. Patterson sees Haiti disaster as catalyst for Caribbean integration

The Most Hon. P. J. Patterson, ON, OCC, PC, QC, urged a very receptive Miami audience last Friday (October 15) to see the current Haitian crisis as a catalyst for Caribbean integration.

The Special Representative of the CARICOM Heads of Government on Haiti and member of the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Committee (IHRC), delivering a wide-ranging annual Eric E. Williams Memorial Lecture at Florida International University (FIU), described the crisis as an opportunity to “unlock the door to ensure that Caribbean integration moves forward on the basis of unleashing our creative skills, improving productivity and the quality of life”.

CARICOM Haiti’s only family

The former Prime Minister pointed out that, although “Haiti rescued boat people, granted Haitian citizenship to fugitives from slavery and inspired other emancipation movements in the Hemisphere”, Haiti enjoyed no circle of belonging except CARICOM.

He continued: “The various activities of CARICOM in dealing with the aftermath of the January earthquake are not just a matter of historical sentiment or an opportune humanitarian response. They are an imperative

arising from the current mutual reality that Haiti is now a member of the CARICOM family. We are spurred to action because the newest but largest member state has suffered a natural disaster of enormous dimensions.”

In emphasising the importance of the Haitian Action Plan for National Reconstruction to the integration of the Caribbean region as a whole, Mr Patterson identified two distinct features that directly affect the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) and the wider integration process. One feature was the unprecedented commitment by a member state to such a long-term framework while receiving international endorsement and approval for an adequate level of resources to facilitate the early years of the process. The other was that for the first time a member state had determined that the planning of its development must be within the framework of the integration process, and thereby enabled its effective participation in the CSME.

Blueprint for regional development

Mr Patterson stressed that the scale and scope of the reconstruction and development effort are huge and will allow the Community, and the wider Caribbean, to collaborate and cooperate in a range of areas. He added that the effort would also allow for planning and execution in a manner that could be impactful and visible for the Haitian people to realise the true benefit of regional cooperation. This would come mainly by way of a strategy that would emphasise “the diversification of the economy and the relocation of the population away from metropolitan Port-au-Prince, through the creation of new centres or poles of development”.

The development of these poles would require simultaneous, multi-sector planning, involving economic sectors such as agriculture; agro-industry; light manufacturing; energy; tourism; housing; social infrastructure and facilities for education, health, culture, sports and transportation, and thus require planning and development which would be applicable throughout the Caribbean region.

Shared competences

According to Mr Patterson the capacity of CARICOM has to be seen as part of Haiti's own national capacity. "As a region, we have the skills, the talent and relevant experience which we are confident can make a positive difference in the rebuilding process. We are adequately geared to share competent staff in such areas as public-sector management, financial controls and accountability, establishment of standards, building codes, land reform, security enhancement and the dissemination of information to the citizenry," he confirmed.

In keeping with a mandate from CARICOM Heads of Government in July, the Government of Haiti had requested both the CARICOM Secretariat and the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) to dedicate adequate resources to the rebuilding and strengthening of its institutional and human capacity. "They have already begun to respond," he asserted.

Mr Patterson referred to the synergies in agriculture and tourism and went on to present the outline of plans for the full incorporation of the private sector of the Caribbean region into the reconstruction process. "This means that the Haitian private sector and, by necessary extension, the rest of the

CARICOM private sector must be equipped and allowed to undertake significant portions of the work entailed in the recovery and development.”

The CSME and economic partnership

The former Prime Minister reiterated that, through its President, Haiti had told the international community that “the model of economic development should enable the country to become an effective member of the CSME in the shortest possible time” and that this was particularly encouraging since Haiti is potentially the largest market in the Community and enjoys special access to key external markets which would benefit from the economic partnership with the European Union, which allows for the cumulation of inputs from CARICOM in meeting the qualifying conditions and Rules of Origin criteria.

Challenges, responses and the private sector

Mr Patterson identified several challenges that could constrain the extent and effectiveness of Haiti/CARICOM joint ventures including: the absence of a mechanism to facilitate the partnering of Haitian private-sector entities/investors with their counterparts in the rest of the Community; inadequate export credit financing; and the absence of direct air and sea links between Haiti and the rest of CARICOM and also with some potential third markets in Latin America; and the consequential high costs and delays through alternative routes.

He indicated that, to meet these challenges, CARICOM Governments had decided to: facilitate a system of coordination and networking of the regional private sector and its initiatives; create a special regional promotional tool

for effective regional economic integration and market development; and establish and resource “a special CARICOM-Haiti Fund” for supporting regional private-sector companies.

CARICOM/Haiti Fund

The fund would be made available to qualifying private sector companies and groups, according to Mr Patterson, with an initial target of \$US 1 billion, as well as taking into account facilities that were already being established by the Government of Spain, the IDB and private donors and there would be a further search for resources available at the regional level, from dedicated development banks through special multilateral funds for such issues as climate change, deforestation and decertification.

The establishment of the fund, Mr Patterson said, was in keeping with “the new approach to accelerating the pace of integration that requires that we: draw on the full range of regional resources in a collaborate and cooperative framework for planning and implementation; deploy our diplomatic teams and use our external relationships to mobilise resources in support of particular member states; and collaborate, cooperate and joint-venture instead of maintaining a narrow focus on our small domestic markets”.

Education

In a detailed presentation on the education component of the Haitian redevelopment and how it would positively impact regional integration, Mr Patterson noted: “The disaster ravaged the education system as a whole – the Université d’Haiti lost more than three hundred students and forty faculty and staff members on January 12. Many of its eleven faculty buildings

collapsed. The private universities, of which there are more than a hundred, were also hit hard.” He commended the Florida International University for its important offer of assistance to the State University of Haiti. He stated: “The intention is to rebuild the universities as soon as possible, and to develop creative forms of international collaboration including student placement in other regional institutions.”

UWI Haiti Initiative

Mr Patterson informed his audience that “a task force on Haitian Higher Education, headed by Dr Matthew Smith, Director of the UWI Haiti Initiative, has prepared a plan of assistance to UNICA’s four Haitian members by forming cooperative links between them and their counterparts across the region.” He emphasised: “While the early priority of the initiative is to provide immediate assistance through scholarships for Haitian students, it also aims to bridge the gap between the francophone and the anglophone Caribbean... ultimately, it is hoped that the UWI plan and partnership with the State University of Haiti will be part of a larger Caribbean programme that will build alliances across the Caribbean territories and strengthen the region’s human capacities in the twenty-first century.”

Mr Patterson, who quoted copiously from Dr Eric Williams throughout his lecture, was optimistic that “for the region as a whole, the international institutional partnerships that are being forged as a consequence of the January 12 disaster could be the precursor to the all-embracing multilingual association of Caribbean states; breaking down the barrier of language that has been a legacy”.

October 18, 2010