

Hurricane David of 1979 & Remembering The Generosity of Nations

By
Gabriel J. Christian

On August 29, 1979, at about 9:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, the raging winds of Hurricane David struck Dominica and literally tore everything apart on the island. So ferocious were the winds -estimated in excess of 200 mph - that they smashed the wind vane and other meteorological instruments at the weather station atop the Government Stock Farm in Roseau. Some 69 Dominicans perished that day; roads and bridges were swept away, and I witnessed a pitiful braying donkey and a Volkswagen car being carried down to the sea by the swollen Roseau River. The winds of David had smashed massive trees in our majestic forests like twigs and our mountains were now bare; most of the trees had been denuded of leaves by the driving wind and rain. Only the firm rock and soil of Dominica's towering massifs had prevented more death and destruction from falling upon the cowering population which had sought refuge in every nook and cranny available to humankind. However, on August 30, 1979, God and humanity smiled on us and our island received assistance in a manner most remarkable. This then is a brief commentary on faith, the resiliency of the human spirit, the kindness of nations and our ability to overcome.

Insult upon injury.

It is often the case that we recall the worst of human nature, and forget the best. It also true, that in the course of human events, insult is oft times heaped upon injury. The truth is that on August 29, 1979, Dominica's was a society just emerging from the worst political and social disorder in its recent history. The worst part of it was that political tumult had splintered the country, and we were otherwise woefully unprepared to deal with a natural disaster of the magnitude which befell us. The insult to the body politic inflicted by human hands was being compounded by the negatives of a natural disaster. How could that be? A brief retelling is necessary here.

Barely ten (10) months earlier, on November 3, 1978, had Dominica attained independence from Britain. Prime Minister Patrick John was at the helm of a government led by the Dominica Labour Party; the Dominica Freedom Party of Eugenia Charles was the official opposition. On the city streets and in the countryside, there was an insurgent left wing among the young which was growing in strength and popularity. It was led by the likes of Michel Douglas, Bernard Wiltshire and Rosie Douglas of the Popular Independence Committees; Pierre Charles - newly elected President of the National Youth Council; Cathie Martin of the Dominica Farmers Union and, William "Para" Riviere of the Peoples Democratic Party.

Elated, and with high hopes, Dominica had joined the United Nations. Most Dominicans, at home and abroad, were eager to prove we could do better than that which had been dished out to us by the "Mother Country" Britain over the centuries. By January of 1979, the government was in trouble. A BBC investigative journalism program, *Panorama* had discovered that the Attorney General Leo Austin had been engaged in working with South African agents to set up front companies to evade the boycott of the apartheid regime then in power. By February of 1979, protests erupted over the planned Free Port project in which Texan Don Pierson's company was literally given hegemony over 45 square miles of the most fertile land in the island's north in a manner which would supplant the authority of the national government. Buffeted by protests, the government tried passing two bills; one to bridle the increasingly opposition-oriented trade unions such as the Civil Service Association led by Charles Savoring and the Waterfront and Allied Workers Union led by Louis Benoit; the other bill aimed to muzzle the press, now led by a *Dominica Chronicle* increasingly critical of government policy.

When the government sought to pass the bills into the law, fifteen thousand students, civil servants, workers, farmers and unemployed youth blocked the entrance to parliament at government headquarters on Kennedy Avenue in Roseau. The Police force was powerless in its inability to restrain the crowd. Desperate, the government called on the Dominica Defence Force to clear the protesters.

On May 29, 1979, a day that will live in infamy, the Dominica Defence Force opened fire on its own people. In an unequal battle between the stone throwing citizens and soldiers; port worker Phillip Timothy fell dead and fifteen others were seriously wounded. A days old baby - whose name remains unknown to history - died of tear gas inhalation. A general strike, alongside looting and burnings, followed. Patrick John's government fell, to be replaced by that of Prime Minister Oliver Seraphine, who led a unity interim government comprising the remnants of the displaced Labour government from which he came; also included were elements from the Freedom Party and political left. Dominica had barely emerged from what was a social tempest of unprecedented ferocity, before the winds of David descended to wreak further havoc.

The Morning After

Early on the morning of August 30, 1979, citizens overcome by the anxiety that further disorder loomed and - with it - food scarcity, assaulted the External Trade Bureau food warehouse near our home in Goodwill and the warehouses which held imports at nearby Woodbridge Bay. Luckily, the steadfast police Chief at the time, Oliver N. Philip, rallied his men and cleared away the looters with baton charges. An S.O.S to the world, telling of the disaster, had by then been sent out by the intrepid ham radio operator Fred White. But even more help was on the way.

Just off Woodbridge Bay, where high seas and soaring white capped waves still roiled the coast, a towering hull of British steel emerged from the grey mist of that sorrowful

morning. It was the *HMS Fife* and its gallant crew; they were the first to arrive. Risking their lives, the men of the *Fife* had fought the hurricane's treacherous aftermath to come to our rescue. As my father gazed out the window of our house at the *Fife*, his colonial imprint which fondly recalled the ethic of Lord Nelson's admonition that "England expects everyman to do his duty," said: God Bless the Royal Navy! Though on leave, he quickly donned his fire officer's uniform and took up his duty.

As soon as they could make it to the jetty, the sailors of *HMS Fife* scoured the city, treating the wounded, and securing temporary roofing for the Princess Margaret Hospital. I can see them now in my mind's eye, clearing Bath Road and Queen Mary Street by hand; many bareback under the now blazing sun. The ship borne helicopter off *HMS Fife* took to our skies, dropping emergency supplies to far-flung villagers who had been marooned by landslides and bridges which had been swept out to sea. Then the United States came in on a massive scale. US Navy Engineers, the famous "Seabees," landed bulldozers and John Deere tractors by landing craft at Fond Cole beach. Huge twin shaft Chinook helicopters set up their base at the Windsor Park, disgorging tons of C-rations. The C-rations, all in olive green cans or plastic wrapping, were a cornucopia of pound cake, frankfurters, corn beef hash, chicken hash, tuna, cheese, crackers, and even fruit cake.

Strapping US soldiers, in full combat gear surrounded the perimeter of the Windsor Park and started stacking the food and medical supplies, as the population, still shocked by the enormity of the disaster, looked on. Generally, our people were immobilized by the scale of the loss. Poor planning and the recent political discord left our people ill prepared for the task at hand. Our survival, literally resided in the generosity of nations.

From South America, Venezuela under its President Carlos Andres Perez, was at forefront. The Venezuelan Armada landed bulldozers in Roseau to assist in clean-up as well; while in the north, Venezuelan Air Force C-130 Hercules Aircraft landed at Melville Hall and literally took-over operations and air traffic control. The Venezuelan Air Force discharged French-made Alouette helicopters with a peculiar tinny sound to drop off food supplies, and ferry the wounded to hospital. So much help was rendered in terms of food aid that - often times- food spoiled. On Leblanc Lane in Goodwill, the Venezuelan Army stored 100 pallets with cartons of eggs in the basement of an empty house for later distribution. With the electricity grid down, most of the eggs went bad in days.

By day two, the French navy also had its choppers in the air and the French Army secured Pottersville Savannah as its base, from which to render assistance. By day three, the Royal Marines had also landed and set up base at the citrus packing plant in lower Goodwill. All the powers, in their quest to rescue Dominicans, worked in the spirit of amity.

Within days our Caribbean Community neighbors sent all they could; my memory of blue-shirt clad Jamaican Coast Guard men unloading supplies under the stern gaze of a smartly dressed officer remains vivid in my mind to this day. Ration cards were handed out to the populace, but food was so plentiful that it was never really "rationed" in the true sense of the word.

It needs remarking that this was time of the Cold War; a time when East and West often competed for the support of the newly independent nations. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was meeting in Havana under Fidel Castro's chairmanship. Rosie Douglas and Bernard Wiltshire were sent to Havana as emissaries of the interim government to secure assistance from the NAM. Thirteen millions dollars were pledged by NAM members, from as disparate sources as Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization. The NAM sent Grenada's new revolutionary leader Maurice Bishop and Cuban Trade Minister Hector Rodriguez Llompart on a special mission to Dominica to assess the needs of the island. Alvin "Alo" Bernard and I, as members of the Popular Independence Committee were part of the welcoming committee for the delegation. In a special session at Springfield Guesthouse, the Cubans offered a 500 bed hospital, 100 university scholarships and \$1 million US dollars in immediate assistance. The fractious government accepted the money and eleven scholarships; the hospital was put on hold.

This was also the time when Dominicans in the UK, US, USVI, the French Territories and Canada came to the fore in packing boxes of food, clothing and medical supplies for their kindred. That coming together in noble endeavor by our Diaspora populations birthed new organizations and is fondly recalled to this day.

Indeed, the evil winds of David had blown down material things, and laid our nation low. However, in an ironic twist it brought other nations to our rescue and their implements of war were beaten into plowshares which cultivated a new love for our common humanity - if only for that moment. People went to church and were reassured by a resilient Christian faith that, by worthy effort, better would come. Our interim government struggled to maintain its unity of purpose and worked well enough to usher in free elections in July 21, 1980. Eugenia Charles' Freedom Party government came into office then and ushered in fifteen years of political stability which we continue to enjoy today. As we look back at that time when our preparedness was found wanting, may we constantly hone our disaster relief skills, by uniting the various services: police, fire, nursing, cadets, scouts and guides movement, Diaspora organizations and Red Cross into an effective vehicle to serve the nation at times of need.

Thirty three years later, all Dominicans should pause and reflect for a moment on how fortunate we have been and how blessed we were to have been given a hand-up by those far and near, when we had stumbled along the way and nature laid us low. We should all pay tribute to those who rendered meritorious service in the aftermath of

Hurricane David. In particular, we honor those nations which forgot the rivalries of the Cold War and joined in common noble endeavor to restore a young and fragile nation. May we always remember them and show the gratitude which is rightly due.