

# Protection and Achievement

by Janet Jagan

September sees two important occasions – Amerindian Heritage Month and Child Protection Week. Both are relevant to life in Guyana and indicate significant trends in our country.

Child Protection Week is an international event observed in over 120 countries throughout the world. The need to focus on the protection of children arises from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, passed some years ago, and incorporated within ministries in many countries, Guyana included. I recall as First Lady in the period 1992-97 I chaired the Local Rights of the Child Commission and we did everything possible to advance all areas in relation to the rights of our nation's children – decent housing, adequate health care, full rights to education, to family life, to play, to living in harmony and to be protected from sexual predators and other abuses both physical and mental. This process is a continuous one and Guyana can be proud of the advances made in the rights of all Guyanese children.

Hopefully, soon to

come is the legislation that will remove the antiquated laws referring to children and the updating to modern laws to ensure children's rights in every aspect of their lives.

The goal of Child Protection Week is to emphasize that all children should grow up in an environment that is safe from abuses, neglect and exploitation. These goals are im-

**Every child needs protection and this will come mainly from his/her parents and teachers. A look, daily, at our newspapers provides shock value only in the number of sexual and other abuses of children of all ages – from infancy to puberty. This is a sad reflection on our society and more intensely promotes the need to protect all children, not only from sexual predators, but from those who would inflict bodily harm on children as a form of punishment, some so severe that the beaten child is hospitalized and forever scarred from the trauma. Child beating must stop!**

portant if our children are to grow up under happy conditions, which they deserve, and become honest, hard working and patriotic citizens of their country of birth. Fundamental to this is a strong family unit which can protect and guide the child through the early and formative years of life. Too often, family cohesion and family values are being diminished by many factors – high rates

of divorce, too early marriages and pregnancies, the tendency to one parent families, poverty, slums, migration and other factors.

Every child needs protection and this will come mainly from his/her parents and teachers. A look, daily, at our newspapers provides shock value only in the number of sexual and other abuses of children of all ages – from infancy to puberty.

This is a sad reflection on our society and more intensely promotes the need to protect all children, not only from sexual predators, but from those who would inflict bodily harm on children as a form of punishment, some so severe that the beaten child is hospitalized and forever scarred from the trauma. Child beating must stop!

It is hoped that this year's Child Protection

Week will successfully influence those who are guilty of child abuse and/or find ways and means of curbing such abuse.

This year's Amerindian Heritage Month has a worthy theme – "Inspiring our nation to move forward in Unity." The September month activities are aimed at the recognition of appreciation and acceptance of the Amerindian culture by all

ethnic groups as well as the promotion of the culture and traditions of Guyana's first people. It also emphasizes the unity of the Amerindian peoples whose nine different tribes have their own way of life, language, culture and traditions.

Great changes have taken place in Guyana in relation to its Amerindian peoples since the advent of the PPP/Civic government in



Janet Jagan

1992. Firstly, was the introduction of a separate ministry for Amerindian Affairs, probably one of the few in the world where indigenous people live. Since then, many positive changes have taken place. One of the most significant is that of the land issue – a promise made to the Amerindian peoples when the British declared Guyana's Independence in 1966. This was never fulfilled by the PNC regime which held illegal power for 28 years. However, under the PPP/C it became a reality and today approximately 14% of Guyana's land mass is owned by the Amerindian people!

This is an ongoing process and the Amerindian Affairs Minister announced that the demarcation of boundaries for three more communities is on stream.

Education for hinterland children has progressed

rapidly, as in the rest of Guyana. Scholarships have also been provided to Amerindian students to the University of Guyana and Cuba as well as to other specialized schools in Guyana. The hinterland scholarship programme has provided secondary residential education to large numbers of hinterland and Amerindian children. Health care has improved considerably and as a result that can be measured, 90% of hinterland communities have access to basic primary health delivery systems. The latest population census shows an increase in the Amerindian population, a factor few countries with indigenous people can boast.

A measure of the growing recognition and status of the Amerindian peoples, once scorned as second class citizens, is the fact that many now have attained high levels of education and employment. In fact, the Guyana Cabinet has three Amerindian Ministers (all women!) one being the prestigious Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Guyana has achieved, in its four terms of PPP/C government what some developed countries with indigenous peoples, have failed to accomplish!