

Dealing with poverty

by Janet Jagan

Poverty is, as we are all aware, the scourge of the planet on which we live. Millions die each year from poverty, starvation and malnutrition. In Africa today, unless international agencies come to the rescue, millions in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and other countries will die of sheer starvation.

Even in the developed world, in the richest nation on earth, the USA, 32 million Americans live in poverty. Of this number, 13 million are children.

Added to the horrendous poverty throughout the world is the presence of widespread HIV/AIDS, which also contributes greatly to poverty and suffering.

In Guyana, our problem with poverty is serious, but not as devastating as that which exists in other parts of the world.

Because of the downturn in the economy during the 28 years of PNC rule and the historical background of colonialism and exploitation, poverty grew to high proportions. Malnutrition, especially in children was very significant. Little was

done to alleviate the growing poverty, which in turn led to high infant and maternal mortality rates.

Poverty has been tackled systematically and with substantial injections of funds since the restoration of democracy in 1992. The late President Cheddi Jagan, Leader of the People's Progressive Party, addressed the problem in his well-known way - logically and with his strong human concern. Under his leadership, the degree of poverty began its decline and today we can boast that we reduced poverty by half. That does not mean that we are

out of the darkness, but we have made a tremendous leap.

Malnutrition in children is sharply on the decline. Our poverty programme addresses the needs of health, education, pure water, sanitation, housing and job training as ways out of the darkness of poverty. And we are succeeding! Statistics show a marked decline in infant and maternal mortality. We are receiving international funding for our Poverty Reduction Programme.

Of course, there are the detractors who can see nothing positive in the PPP/

Civic government's endeavours at social progress. Recently there was a report that child labour (one of the signs of poverty) was "widespread" in Guyana, amounting to some 100,000 children. This false report failed to understand the type of child labour that exists in Guyana, most of which is associated with family farms or enterprises. Yes, many children work on their parents' farms or businesses, but not during school hours. In fact, it is a positive state for children to be so involved in their free time or holidays as it builds the work ethic, brings

them closer to their families and occupies their spare time in a manner that can keep out the dangers of drugs, gangs, crime, sex and other attractions.

The actual number of children who work and do not go to school is not threatening. Most of them come from the most impoverished section of our society where families have disintegrated and many mothers face life without male support or a strong family system.

We can be proud that Guyana is facing this worldwide problem of poverty with diligence and care.