

**STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GUYANA,
CAROLYN RODRIGUES-BIRKETT, ON THE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT BETWEEN
THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CARIFORUM COUNTRIES AT THE UK/CARIBBEAN FORUM,
LONDON, 15-16TH JULY 2008**

Co-Chairs

It is not a secret that my government is deeply troubled about many aspects of the EPA that has been initialled by representatives of the EU and Cariforum.

We have asked our sister-governments in the Caribbean Community to delay any formal signing of the agreement until we have had the opportunity to consult with stakeholders, and this might be possible.

This process of stakeholder consultation will begin in a formal way over the next few weeks, but my government is already in receipt of informal responses to the EPA from several groups in our society who have expressed grave concern. Indeed, it is this expression of concern that has caused my government to pause.

No government can be deaf to the outcry of important groups in its society. We are democracies, not command economies. In democracies, government have to listen and to dialogue particularly when the decisions that are to be made have long term consequences.

This EPA between the EU collectively and Cariforum countries individually will set the relationship between Europe and each of the Caribbean countries for many years to come, and, importantly, it will be a benchmark for every trade and investment agreement that Caribbean countries enter in the future.

It is in this context, that my government holds the view that a mutually acceptable agreement - and one that would endure - could emerge from more time in which to negotiate the more troubling aspects of the EPA that has been initialled.

There are very few Caribbean governments that have pronounced themselves entirely satisfied with the EPA. Indeed, many of them have indicated unease. They point to the EU threat to impose GSP on their exports into the EU as the reason for agreeing to initial the EPA.

My own government agreed to the initialling of the EPA because of the fear of the effect of GSP treatment on our exports of rice, rum and sugar into the EU.

But, fear is not a basis for a lasting agreement, nor for the promotion of beneficial relations.

Guyana, like every other Cariforum country, wants an EPA with the EU. We would like a good agreement – one that we could champion in the certain knowledge that it will improve the social and economic conditions of our people.

In saying that aspects of the EPA should be re-negotiated, we are not alone.

A High Level Technical Meeting, convened by the Commonwealth and the ACP Secretariat in Cape Town in April, was strongly of the view that the development dimension of the initialled EPAs need to be strengthened. The meeting concluded that “there is a need to review contentious clauses to ensure their consistency with national and regional development plans and aspirations”; and further that “there is still legal space to negotiate resolution of the contentious issues”.

In the words of Lady Glenys Kinnock, co-Chair of the Joint ACP-EU Parliamentary Assembly, to that meeting, “trade liberalisation itself will not deliver economic development...and a recycled 10th EDF and a promise of AID FOR TRADE will not suffice”.

The approach of the European Commission to these negotiations has been severely criticised by the Joint Committee on International Development of the UK Parliament and by the ACP Ministerial Council.

Just last week we learnt of a Report commissioned by the current Presidency of the EU, which argued strongly that the EPA has been conducted under pressure, that its development aspects are unsatisfactory, and that it places an inordinate burden on the countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. It makes several recommendations that are deserving of serious consideration. The Christiane Taubira report is now a matter of record.

The distinguished Economics Nobel Laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, has also warned of the dangers of an EPA in its present form.

Co-Chairs, this agreement is of indefinite duration. We need to make sure we get it right; that it is crafted to promote the sustainable development of our economies and reduce the poverty of our people; and that our society as a whole is committed to its implementation. For make no mistake about it, if our populations do not believe the agreement is in their interest, if they believe it has been imposed upon them, it will not work.

Guyana for its part has insisted on the need for additional time to carry out its national consultations. We are very mindful that the EPA will be signed by each Cariforum country in its individual capacity and that, therefore, each country will be accountable and has to be sure that it can live with the commitments it makes.

The EU has already acknowledged that the negotiations with some countries in Africa will go on until 2009. There is, therefore, no tyrannical clock that demands a signing now,

Additional time for consultation on the Cariforum EPA, with the possibility of re-negotiation of its problematic features; can only redound to the mutual benefit of both the Caribbean and Europe.