The border record, and the case for a standing national and international campaign

23 November 2026

Dear Editor,

Since the Reuters revelation that a US State Department official raised the possibility of Guyana ceding part of the Essequibo, elements of the Opposition have been accusing Dr Bharrat Jagdeo, a former President, the Vice-President and General Secretary of his party, and by extension the Government and that party, of conceding ground to Venezuela. The accusation does not survive the record, at a time when Guyana can least afford division.

The accusers should begin with where the proposal on the maritime area came from. Pages 87 and 88 of the "Memorandum of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on the application filed before the International Court of Justice by the Co-operative Republic of Guyana on March 29, 2018", in its account of the Good Offices process (1989-2014), report that at the first meeting between the facilitators, Emilio Figueredo for Venezuela and Dr Barton Scotland for Guyana, held in New York on 13 August 1990, Venezuela proposed "a coastal area that involves territorial cessions to be defined in favour of Venezuela". According to Mr Figueredo's report to the Venezuelan Government, Dr Scotland found the approach interesting, noted the constitutional difficulties of any territorial arrangement, and "agreed on a corridor towards the Atlantic, possibly accompanied by a small stretch of coastline." That was under the administration of the day, before 1992, and it is what Dr Jagdeo referred to when he was Opposition Leader. I make no accusation against Dr Scotland, because exploring options in a confidential UN process is not conceding territory. The same standard applies to Dr Jagdeo, who as President proposed to President Chávez in July 2010 that the controversy go to the ICJ, as Ralph Ramkarran disclosed in 2015. His Government carried the case to The Hague and has held to it.

I concur with the core premise of Mr Ramkarran's column of 21 November, "Venezuela exercises leverage and the US blinks": that Venezuela is using its new standing in Washington to pressure Guyana into negotiating, on a reading of the Geneva Agreement that has no merit. The pressure comes from Caracas, not from any concession by Dr Jagdeo.

The history of the Geneva Agreement points the same way. The 1899 Arbitral Award was recognised and respected by Venezuela for decades before Guyana gained independence. In 1949, a memorandum written in 1944 by Severo Mallet-Prevost, Venezuela's counsel at the arbitration, was published after his death. It alleged a political deal between Britain and Russia, brokered by the tribunal's president, Friedrich Martens. In 1962, with British Guiana moving towards independence, Venezuela took the memorandum to the United Nations and declared the Award null and void. The Agreement was signed in February 1966 by Britain, British Guiana and Venezuela. After a Mixed Commission failed to agree by 1970, the Port of Spain Protocol froze matters for twelve years, and Good Offices and Enhanced Mediation then failed. The UN Secretary-General chose the ICJ in 2018, and Guyana filed its Application on 29 March 2018.

That is the irony. The Geneva Agreement Venezuela relies on is the same instrument that set out the pathway to finality at the ICJ, where hearings have concluded and the Court is deliberating.

Nothing in it replaces the Award with a negotiated border, and to date Venezuela has produced no evidence in support of its claim.

What Venezuela lacks in evidence, it makes up for in persistence. Guyana depends on international support for its protection, chiefly from Washington, where administrations and officials rotate and knowledge of our case cannot be assumed. Venezuela, as Mr Ramkarran notes, pursues its claim as an industry of diplomats, academics and historians that Guyana does not match. We must answer with a sustained national and international educational and advocacy campaign, aimed at our bilateral and security partners and the wider world, with a protected allocation in the next national budget and permanent research capacity behind it.

In light of the foregoing, I urge the Opposition to desist from the blame game and the politicisation, and the Government to engage them. Together we must devise a national strategy; we cannot be divisive on this matter. Opposition elements should educate themselves on the controversy and its history, because Venezuela reads, quotes and uses what we say about ourselves. To this end, it is noteworthy that at the CARICOM-brokered meeting at Argyle in December 2023, Attorney General Anil Nandlall, who accompanied President Ali, disclosed that President Maduro arrived with volumes of Guyanese press articles on the border and oil, not evidence for his claim. Accordingly, our territorial integrity is neither a party matter nor a political one.

Yours respectfully,

Joel Bhagwandin