

CIVIL DISORDER: *JANUARY 12*

GEORGETOWN, GUYANA

PRELIMINARY REPORT

SUBMITTED, JUNE 21, 1998.

LE MERIDIEN PEGASUS, GEORGETOWN, GUYANA

BY

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Section 1: Introduction

The latter half of the 20th century has witnessed several serious disorders in Guyana. In what is known as *Black Friday*, on February 16, 1962 scores of mainly Indian business establishment in Georgetown were burnt down. The period from 1964 to 1966 saw the country in a state of virtual civil war that was predicated on race. On October 5, 1992 as the quick count revealed that the PPP had established a lead in the polls, angry African Guyanese took to the streets in acts of violence, burning and looting. In each case the government of

the day ordered an official enquiry.

On January 12, 1998, to quote the *Stabroek News* of the following day, there was "terror in the city." Almost simultaneously in different parts of the city mobs unleashed widespread acts of beating, robbery and sexual molestation. The similarity with the previous disorders is uncanny. Once again the PPP won a general election. And once again the PNC did not see it fit to work within the Rule of Law, but instead chose to embark on a course of action and tactics, the logical consequence of which was January 12, according to the Guyana Human Rights Association.

Six months later there is still no indication that an official inquiry is being contemplated. On the contrary there prevails a general mood to disremember and in some segments of the population to deny the horrors enacted on that fateful day. Members of the Guyanese Indian Foundation Trust (GIFT) are convinced that if these violations were ignored it would lead to simmering resentment which would impact negatively on society as a whole. It was in this context that GIFT decided to conduct a comprehensive documentation of these violations.

Methodology: Identifying victims

GIFT sought the assistance of a number of non-political organisations particularly the religious organisations of Guyana. These were:

Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha,

Guyana Central Arya Samaj,

Maha Sabha,

Guyana Presbyterian Church

Mahatma Gandhi Organisation,

Radha Krishna Mandir,

Guyana Islamic Trust,

Central Islamic Organisation of Guyana,

Anglican Church of Guyana, and

Roman Catholic Church of Guyana.

Six of these organisations, the Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha, the Central Arya Samaj of Guyana, the Maha Sabha, Guyana Presbyterian Church, the Radha Krishna Mandir, the Guyana Islamic Trust agreed to co-sponsor advertisements calling on victims to come forward. They also agreed to make their offices available as locations in the city where people could report.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

On January 12th, 1998 a large number of innocent citizens were victims of unprovoked violent attacks. There have been reports of persons being **BEATEN, ROBBED, SEXUALLY MOLESTED, AND OTHERWISE TERRORISED.**

A full documentation of these incidents is being undertaken.

Persons who were victims, witnesses or have any information relating to these incidents are asked to kindly contact any one of the following organisations or their branches:

The Guyana Central Arya Samaj The Guyana Presbyterian Church

78 Premniranjan Place

183 Sribasant Street

Prashad Nagar

Prashad Nagar

Georgetown

Georgetown

The Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha The Maha Sabha Ashram

392/393 Janges Street

162 Lamaha Street

Prashad Nagar	North Cummingsburg
Georgetown	Georgetown
<i>The Guyana Islamic Trust</i>	<i>Radha Krishna Mandir</i>
29 Lombard Street	Camp & Quamina Streets
Werk-en-Rust	Georgetown
Georgetown	

All information including the identities of respondents will be kept strictly confidential.

Specimen of advertisement

The advertisement was placed in the *Guyana Chronicle* of March 28 and 29, the *Stabroek News* of March 29 and 31, and the *Mirror* of March 29 and April 1. In addition the same advertisement was run on Channels 11, 12 and 65 from March 28 to April 1. Above is a specimen of the advertisement.

Contacting victims

Members of GIFT were given training as interviewers and subsequently went around communities in West Demerara, East Bank and East Coast, and sections of Georgetown. Interviewers also went to key areas in Georgetown where people were trapped on January 12: (1) the East Coast bus park, (2) the East Bank bus park, (3) the West Demerara bus park, (4) the Transport and Harbour's Department ferry, (5) the speed boat embarkation location at the south-west corner of the Stabroek market, (6) the Bourda and Stabroek markets. Contact was also made with those persons referred to us by the co-sponsoring organisations.

Interviewing victims and guaranteeing confidentiality

Once victims were contacted and they were informed of the nature and purpose of the investigation and that the investigation itself is a non-governmental initiative, the actual process of interviewing was done at a place convenient to the respondent to ensure the highest degree of confidentiality and privacy. Once the interview was completed all the information was brought to the GIFT Computer Centre and entered into a special data

base which assigned an identification number to each victim. The original interview forms were then stored in a vault at the centre access to which was limited only to the Director of Operations. To make sure a human being does not become a mere number a substitute name has also been given to each victim referred to in the body of the report. Each interview lasted roughly 25 to 30 minutes and assistance was given to the victim only when such help was requested or where the victim could either not read or write for him or herself.

This report contains information from interviews conducted from April 12 to June 10, designated stage one of the interviewing process. Since victims are still contacting us we are of the opinion that a significant number is still undocumented. Therefore this documentation process is continuing. Consequently this report is an interim report.

Section 2: Results

1. Number of Respondents:

The names of 303 victims were identified to us but testimonies were obtained from 228. We were unable to document the remaining 75 for the following reasons:

- a) migration - 6
- b) victims' fear of retribution - 49
- c) psychological denial by victims - 11, and
- d) logistical difficulties - 9

Of the 228 statements, there were 143 males and 85 females. 170 individuals reported seeing other Indians, either individually or in groups of 8-10, and in a significant number of cases entire bus loads, being subjected to physical molestation and robbery. Among these were a significant number of school children. Based on these accounts, and using the lower estimate we find that the number of persons who suffered actual violations must be in excess of one thousand (1000).

The testimonies state that thousands of Indian Guyanese had to be locked in their place of work or take refuge in safe places. We estimate that these were in excess of 10,000. It must be recognised that all these people suffered mental terror because they were victims since they were under the threat of violence had their freedom taken away. Each of these persons had to be evacuated from the city by special and extraordinary means. The persons, who were involved in this evacuation were themselves exposed to grave danger. They were all victims.

2. Ethnicity

Of the 228 testimonies, 224 identified themselves as Indian Guyanese. The remaining 4 did not answer this question.

3. Reason for the assault

In response to the question why victims felt that they were attacked we have obtained the following responses.

	Race	Race & Robbery	Robbery	Politics	Politics & Race	Did not answer	Total
Men	88	5	1	8	5	36	143
Women	55	1	1	2	0	26	85
Total	143	6	2	10	5	62	228

Table 1

4. Comments made during the attacks:

The comments made during the attacks again indicate that race was the principal factor in these violations. Here is a sample of some of the statements made by perpetrators during the attack.

we go kill a you coolie [Ramnarine Arjune 0516]

we're gonna kill you coolie ---- [Niaz Al Mansoor A3806]

let's wuk up this bus it gat coolies [Virendra V3806]

coolie gon dead today [Jayashri Sinha S3964]

black people a run country, na coolie [Nita Bahadur B9087]

bus he head, you coolie s---- [Lenny Cork C 2418]

In this way all the 228 statements collected reveal a strong and violent racial content.

4. Reason for being in Georgetown on January 12

As to what the reasons why victims were in Georgetown on January 12, a total of 213 of the respondents answered this question. Of these 134 (62.9%) were in Georgetown for **job**, 44 (21.7%) persons were in town for either official or private business, 11 (5.2%) reported they were in the city for **shopping**, and the remainder 24 (11.3%) were in Georgetown for miscellaneous reasons.

5. Type of Violations

Among the 228 victims, there were 144 (63.1%) cases of robbery, 97 (42.54%) cases of verbal abuse, and 129 (56.58%) cases of physical abuse.

6. Women Victims

Of the total number there were 85 (37.3%) women victims. In analysing violations of these 85 women we have found that 51 (60%) were robbed and 41 (48.2%) suffered verbal abuse.

Of the total number of 228 victims, there were 85 women victims 44 (51.8%) were physically and sexually abused. Here we must understand that touching a female without her permission constitutes a violation of her sexual privacy, that is, sexual molestation. In this regard women were twice victims. As Indians they were victims and as women they were victims. Here are some examples, based on the women's testimonies, of the kinds of violations that Indian women suffered on January 12.

I refused to do so and he placed the knife at my throat and scrambled my clothes. I retaliated but he continued to grab on to my clothing...he tore off my blouse and I was left naked. My brother had to cover me. [Begum Arifa A33676]

I saw a crowd of about 13 Black males and females physically assaulting an Indian girl. I drove into the crowd

and shouted at the semi-nude girl to jump into my car. She had on only panties. [Lenny Cork: C2418]

I was trying to get into a bus at the East Bank car park. I was attacked by 4 Negro men who tore off my jersey and pushed their hands in my brassier.[Bibi Mahadeo Lakshman L6188]

A chop was directed to a woman in the bus. Her left arm was damaged. I saw two females lying naked on the road trying to cover themselves. [Bhanumati Dharamdeo D8331]

After a few steps he returned and slapped on the women and pushed his hand in her bosom. [Meena Tulsi T8331]

I was in a No. 42 bus when a Black female pulled me out saying: This is a blackman bus. Another Black female passenger who was about to embark the bus joined her. As soon as I was pushed out of the bus a group of young Black men began beating me. [Bhilari Shahanshah S5180]

The above testimonies suffice to demonstrate a pervasive tactic in the disturbance was to humiliate the Indian female.

7. Time of Assault

Most of the victims report being attacked between the hours of 11.00 am and 4.00 p. m.

8. Locations of Violence

The exit points in the city were the principal scenes for violence. Victims were particularly vulnerable in the Stabroek Market area as they sought to get out of the city from the (1) West Demerara bus park, (2) the Demerara River ferry, (3) the East Bank bus and car parks, (4) the East Coast bus park, and (5) the Berbice bus park. In addition certain business centres frequented by Indian Guyanese were also target areas. For example lower Water Street from America Street down to the KFC area, the whole of the Regent Street area

and the Bourda Market.

9. Loss and Damages

The documentation shows that there was widespread destruction of property including damage to vehicles and business properties. Theft from victims and businesses was prevalent. A preliminary quantification based on the present testimonies show that a sum of over \$3,235,000 in cash was stolen from victims as they were systematically robbed. Further, the documentation has shown that several stallholders in Bourda Market and other victims were looted of goods and other valuables to the amount of over \$10,000,000. This does not include the value of jewellery, handbags etc., stolen from victims and destruction to private property such as windscreens.

Section 3: The Perpetrators

1. Number involved in Attacks

Respondents have given principally two sets of numbers. In one case numbers ranged from 5-20 and in the other 20 and more. A few of the statements show that there have also been individual assailants. The statements speak of gangs of young Blacks sweeping across the city with amazing speed and this would be possible if the gangs were kept at an appropriate size, that is, large enough to overpower single individuals and small enough to move swiftly.

2. Racial Breakdown

Each of the 228 cases examined show that the perpetrators were entirely Blacks eliminating all doubts whatsoever about the racist nature of the disorder.

3. Gender classification

Of the 228 statements, in 92 cases the gangs were mixed with both males and females. In 108 cases it was men alone and in 4 cases it was women alone. 14 of the statements made no mention of the attackers. What strikes one reviewing these statements is the large number of women assailants and the viciousness with which they attacked not only men but their fellow women as well. Here are some statements in part of the acts of violence committed by Black women in exclusively Black gangs:

Black women beat an Indian women on the head with a gun

[Lennox Sahadeo S9540]

attacked by a gang of Black women near the New Building Society complex [Anoop Kumar K1353]

three well-dressed Black women attacked me in the park. One had a knife. They took my money and jewellery [Salamat Rasheed R2082]

two Black females threw stones at my car and broke its windows [Brian Raghu R7248]

two Black women passengers threw me out of an East Bank bus. I fell on the ground and Black men started to beat me [Bhilari Shahanshah S5180]

4. Age

The average age of the attackers ranged between 20 and 30. However a significant number of statements reveal that even Black boys and girls, with ages ranging from 14-17, were involved in the gangs. The presence of children engaging in acts of terror must constitute one of the more perturbing aspects of January 12 and points to a deeper social and cultural malaise.

5. How they were armed

In every case people in the gangs were armed with guns, knives, cutlasses, sticks and clubs, broken bottles, bricks, iron rods, and galvanised pipes, in short any object that could inflict pain and injury and which could be used for the purposes of intimidation and terror. Here are excerpts from the testimonies of some of the victims:

they pulled a knife at me [Sunita Bharati B5577]

three Blackmen came up to me and put a knife at my throat [Nadiya Datta D4021]

a woman was chopped on her left arm with a cutlass [Bhanumati]

Dharamdeo D8331]

some of the attackers had broken bottles, sticks, and knives [Chandravati Bhashkar B2435]

African boys armed with a chopper and knives [Sandra Narayan N7685]

a knife was placed at my son's throat [Sita Wayne W2082]

one had a gun at the driver and the other a sharpened screw driver at me [Surindra Bhupati B7685]

about six African women attacked an Indian woman beating her on the head with a gun [Lennox Sahadeo S9540]

Section 4: The Role of the Police

1. Extent of police presence

The police were conspicuous by their absence. Of the 228 statements examined regarding police presence and assistance fully 170 state that the police were no where to be seen. In 26 cases the police were present but rendered no assistance. In 6 cases the police were present and helped. 26 of the respondents did not comment on police presence or absence. The six cases that record police assistance are as follows

The police did intervene to prevent a crowd from entering the premises of the Customs House. [Mr. Ram Indu Singh S2082].

While in a mini-bus near Demico House the mob pulled Indians out of the bus and began beating and robbing them. Two policemen present on the scene intervened. [Compton Charran C0516]

As I was being beaten and robbed, the police intervened. [Gayatri Dularie D8513]

Police intervened. [Motirani M8231].

The police rescued me and took me to a taxi. [Sandra Narayan N7685]

Police intervened. [Vishwanath Nandi N5577].

Police intervened. [Robin Ramsahai R1353].

Section 5: Conclusion

What does this documentation of the victims' experience tell us?

It tells us that January 12 was not a minor infraction by a "few" hooligans. It tells us that the perpetrators came well prepared and well armed. It tells us that January 12 was a well orchestrated efficiently executed exercise in terror of major proportions.

It tells us that it was nakedly and explicitly racist. Indian Guyanese were consciously selected out for brutalisation. They were attacked not for their political persuasions. They were attacked not because of their religious persuasions. They were attacked not for anything else but that they were seen to be Indians. Such deliberate, unabashed racism presents a most frightening spectre and bodes ill for the future.

It tells us that a large number of women and even children were victims. Traditionally in conflicts and confrontations women and children have always been held to be sacrosanct, and are to be spared and protected. This time honoured tradition was broken on January 12. It reveals a deep and frightening cruelty. Indian women were doubly violated, first because of their very womanhood and second because of their race.

It tells us that African Guyanese women could find it within themselves to degrade and brutalise their fellow Indian Guyanese women.

It tells us that these attacks were always unprovoked.

It tells us *that the police were conspicuous by their absence.* This is remarkable and mysterious. We must remember that after the December 15 general elections the PNC had engaged in a relentless build-up of racist hysteria and confrontationalism. The Commissioner of Police, Mr. Laurie Lewis, is quoted in the Sunday Chronicle January 11, 1998 condemning the violent behavior of PNC supporters thus: "It is not peaceful to make children fearful, it is not peaceful to curse people, and it is not peaceful to bang on doors calling persons by name and saying they have ten minutes to get out of the building." January 12 could not have been unanticipated, thus the apparent unpreparedness of the police and failure to minimise or prevent this disorder

demands an explanation.

It tells us that the very livelihood of Indian Guyanese was threatened. More than 60% of the victims were in the city because of their jobs.

It tells us that at least there were six African Guyanese who exposed themselves to risks to help Indian Guyanese during the dark events of this terrible day. In one of these six cases an African male took a wounded Indian Guyanese boy to the hospital, waited until he was treated and then ensured his safe exit out of the city. **There must still be hope.**