

Address by the President of the ACP-EEC Council,
Ratu Sir K.K.T. MARA, Prime Minister of Fiji

Suva, Fiji
April 15, 1977

Mr. President, honourable ministers, your excellencies,
distinguished delegates.

Let me first of all say how happy I am that our long-standing wish to have the ACP-EEC Council of Ministers' meeting in Fiji has finally come to pass. We of the Pacific are indeed glad that you have agreed to come to our region, the furthest from Brussels, for this second ACP-EEC Council meeting and the first to be held in an ACP State since Lomé. Your presence here is firm proof of the interdependence between nations. It gives us all the opportunity to follow up our active involvement in the negotiations for the Lomé Convention with a principal demonstration of our commitment to it and close association with its operation.

I have already had occasion to welcome ACP delegates. I am delighted now to invite our EEC friends to join us in what I hope will be serious and purposeful deliberations. At the same time I hope you will also share and enjoy what we have to offer outside this conference hall.

I congratulate you, Mr President, on your assumption of duties as president of the EEC Council. We think it is particularly fitting and fortunate that the presidency of the EEC should rest with the United Kingdom at this meeting in Suva. I say this because it was through the accession of the United Kingdom to the Treaty of Rome that many of us recently entered into association with the EEC culminating in the Lomé Convention.

Mr President, this is a time when the international community is striving towards a sustained and constructive dialogue between rich and poor countries. So the meeting of nearly one half of the world's developing states with the largest grouping of developed countries, in the relationship of the Lomé Convention, is a firm step forward. We must therefore, at this joint session of Council grasp the full potential of the ACP-EEC connection for reinforcing interdependence and co-operation between nations. It can mean a new phase in the Lomé Convention, perhaps the Suva phase, in which we recapture the spirit of Lomé and resume the buoyance and optimism that were so evident when the convention was signed.

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The last two years have brought great progress in the establishment of the elaborate institutional framework and the co-operative arrangements required by the new convention. This has only been possible through the dedicated service of many from both the EEC and the ACP Groups, and I am pleased to acknowledge the great contribution that they have made.

It is, however, rather in what these arrangements were intended to achieve that there is cause for concern.

Some of the problems which have developed were unavoidable. Treaties and conventions can never provide for all eventualities. However, trade problems have persisted, consultation has been unsatisfactory, indeed there has been a failure to give substance to the special relationship which was intended by the convention. All these factors have led to a rundown of the great hopes and enthusiasm generated by the convention initially and are causing grave concern.

And I do not think this is groundless concern. The ACP discussions over the last two days have seen delegate after delegate express doubt and disillusionment. Much of this doubt and disillusionment has been caused by delay and unwillingness to take decisions. From this it follows that these fears can be dispelled by a constructive expeditious end decision making meeting here in Suva.

But we would be less than frank if we did not remind ourselves that there are important issues which were debated at the joint Council of Ministers in Brussels last July and later in discussions between the Presidents of the EEC and ACP in October, and that these issues are unresolved.

We have always laid great emphasis on the need for consultation, and we still do. It is only by constant consultation that a Treaty of this kind can be made to work. But I think in our emphasis on this need, and on this function of the joint Council of Ministers, we have forgotten that at the end of the day this joint Council is a decision making body. Does it really make sense for senior Ministers of so many countries to come all this way simply to consult, to exchange views and go away again?

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We have spoken much of the spirit of Lomé - and despite all I have said, I still believe that this flame can be rekindled and fanned back to its original warmth. However, sometimes it is useful to go back to the text of the Treaty and find our bearings. In this connection I would refer to Article 73 and Article 74 which give a clear view of the powers of this meeting and indeed of the opportunities of this meeting.

Article 73 states that the Joint Council of Ministers shall act by mutual agreement between the Community on the one hand and the ACP States on the other. Article 74 says:

"Where provided for in this convention, the Council of Ministers shall have the power to take decisions."

This I am convinced is the principle message my ACP colleagues would like me to stress today, that Suva presents a new opportunity, and that we want it to do so.

But it will only happen if both parties are prepared to use the decision making powers of the joint Council to advance in a concrete form all the aspirations enshrined in the convention.

In a broadcast interview with members of the BBC in Brussels which we heard in Suva on Monday night, we gathered the view that the priorities at this meeting would be the priorities which the ACP countries sought.

It may be helpful then if I could very briefly outline what are these priorities. They are in fact the points to which I referred earlier which were the subject of discussion at Brussels with the joint Council in July last year and later in October between the two Presidents and which to this day are not resolved. Other issues have arisen later, but we would refrain from interposing any of them until we reach conclusions on the priority issues.

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Other colleagues, Chairman of appropriate ACP Sub-Committees, will doubtless be raising individual matters (on sugar, the EEC generalized preference scheme, groundnuts, bananas, rum, surplus EEC agricultural products and others). I think I shall have done my duty as president of the ACP if I have succeeded in bringing clearly before the meeting the challenge and opportunity for decision. The prophet Joel talks of "multitudes in the valley of decision". Let us raise our eyes far beyond the narrow confines of this room to the multitudes we represent throughout the world and who await decisions. We must not fail them. The Lomé Convention has already conferred significant benefits on many of us. We in Fiji have found the sugar arrangements, stabex and aid of immense value to us. I know we are not an isolated example. The Lomé Convention is working but it is showing signs of strain. It could even be exhibiting some cracks. It is because I believe so strongly in all its force for good, both for its participants and as an example throughout the world that I have tried to set out our feelings as clearly as I can. This is a political meeting and we are looking for political will. Given that, added to all the goodwill that already exists, I have no fear that we can succeed.

Finally, Mr President since our first EEC-ACP Council of Ministers' meeting, some significant changes have taken place which must be noted. New EEC Commissioners have been appointed. We welcome them and offer them our congratulations. Of the two who deal with us closely - those for development and agriculture - we are happy to note that our old friend Mr CHEYSSON has been reappointed. This would help to provide continuity at this critical period in our relations. We welcome Mr Finn Olav GUNDELACH, and extend best wishes to him in his new and difficult assignment. We are glad to note that he has come with a reputation that is propitious for our establishment with his predecessor, Mr Pierre LARDINOIS. We understand that our friend Dr Kroha with whom we have been able to develop such an understanding relationship is about to leave the Commission. We extend to him our very best wishes.

To you all, I extend once more the hospitality of Fiji and our pacific neighbours. We thank you for coming and hope that you will take away memories of friendly association and a job well done.
