



Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica

Address to the Nation

by

Honourable Roosevelt Skerrit
Prime Minister and Minister for Finance

On the occasion of the
37th Anniversary of Independence

November 3, 2015
8:00 a.m.
Windsor Park Sports Stadium

Salutations:

My peace I bring you, by dear brothers and sisters, and as the Good Book says, “Look not upon me but upon Him who has sent me.”

- Your Excellency Charles Savarin, President of the Commonwealth of Dominica and Mrs. Savarin
- Honourable Alix Boyd Knights, Speaker of the House of Assembly
- Your Lordship Justice Errol Thomas, Resident Judge
- Your Lordship the Most Reverend Gabriel Malzaire, Bishop of Roseau
- Your Excellency Eliud Williams, former President of the Commonwealth of Dominica and Mrs. Williams
- Cabinet Colleagues and Spouses
- Honourable Lennox Linton, Leader of the Parliamentary Opposition and Mrs. Linton
- Your Excellencies the Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps and other visiting dignitaries and Spouses
- Dr. Carissa Etienne, Director General of The Pan American Health Organisation and Mr. Gregoire
- Reverend Novelle Josiah and Pastor Arlington Wilson who are assisting with the Prayers this morning
- Other Honourable Members of Parliament
- Your Worship Mayor Irene John & Mr. John
- Chairmen of Commissions
- Ambassador Steve Ferrol, Cabinet Secretary and Mrs. Ferrol
- Permanent Secretaries and Spouses

- Awardees
- Members of the Media
- Distinguished guests
- Visiting Dominicans
- Ladies and Gentlemen
- Friends, all

Good morning to you –

Happy 37th Independence Day, to each and every one of you!

To God be the glory; Great things He has done!

Thank you for the efforts you have made to come out and celebrate this important milestone in reaching our goal of a “Prosperous, Peaceful and Just Dominica”.

We have come a long way during the past 37 years, even though each stepping stone has been challenging. This particular one is probably the most slippery we have experienced so far. But we must never lose our footing, as we make our way towards our goal.

On a personal note, I was moved to reflect deeply on the years ahead as Melissa and I welcomed the latest addition to our family, Isabella Cherry-Ann Skerrit, who was born at 11:30p.m. on Thursday, October 29.

I am pleased to report to you today, that both mother and baby are doing fine, and shall return to Dominica as soon as medical and aviation regulations permit.

Thank you all, for your prayers during the period of complications and for your expressions of best wishes on that very special occasion.

Notwithstanding my excitement, I am still torn, as I grapple every day with having to comfort families in Dominica, who have lost their loved ones, as well as returning those families who were displaced, to a level of normalcy. This has been my pre-occupation even while I was away for the few days.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, in normal circumstances, on this occasion, I would dwell, almost exclusively, on performance reports from various departments of government and evaluate progress made in our quest to fulfill the mandate given to us.

I would focus on how, as a nation, we have responded to the challenges of the 21st century, and in particular since the Great Recession of 2008, but on 27th August, 2015 we got a “wake up call”.

Tropical Storm Erika paid us a most unwelcome visit, bringing with it unusually heavy rainfall over an extended period which resulted in intense and rapid flooding and numerous mudslides.

This country suffered extensive damage, related primarily to the infrastructure, housing and agriculture sector. The worst occurred in villages and settlements situated near ravines, rivers and gorges, with the South, South-East and the West registering the highest impact.

Let me take this opportunity to thank all those countries; those local, national, regional and international agencies; and above all, Dominicans at home and abroad, who responded spontaneously and urgently to us, in our time of need.

I can certainly say that your contribution was invaluable to the success of our recovery efforts immediately after Tropical Storm Erika. With our collective efforts, within a few weeks, Dominica was open for business.

I am delighted to inform you that every Ministry has taken on the task of rebuilding Dominica with enthusiasm and commitment to serving the people of Dominica.

The responses of Ministries and related agencies to the challenges left in the wake of Tropical Storm Erika have boosted my confidence in the ability of our people to overcome every obstacle that beset us.

I salute the people of Dominica, for each of you went about the business of initial recovery, with creativity and responsibility. This further demonstrated our willingness to bury political differences and pull together.

Ladies and gentlemen, after the passage of Tropical Storm Erika, it was vital to have an urgent assessment of the damage, to serve as a basis for planning, responding, and rebuilding Dominica in a structured and sustainable way.

I am therefore eternally grateful for all those who facilitated the production of the Rapid Damage and Impact Assessment (RDIA) Report, prepared by the World Bank, in conjunction with other development partners, and with support from the Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica.

These included experts from regional and international organizations, namely the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA); Caribbean Development Bank; United Nations Development Program; the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment; the United Nations Children's Fund.

Support was also received from the Pan-American Health Organization; the UN Food and Agriculture Organization; the World Food Program; the Red Cross; OECS Commission and the University of the West Indies.

The Rapid Damage and Impact Assessment (RDIA) Report concluded that the total damage and loss amounted to EC\$1.3 billion (US\$483 million), equivalent to approximately 90% of Dominica's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The majority of damage was sustained in the transport sector (60 percent), followed by the housing sector (11 percent) and the agricultural sector (10 percent).

To date, out of a total population of 72,340 people, 14 people were confirmed dead; 16 are missing; 574 are homeless and 1034 evacuated, with approximately 7,229 impacted by the event in special disaster zones.

Today, I once again express condolences to those who have lost loved ones and extend my sympathy to all the victims of Tropical Storm Erika and pray that God continues to comfort you, in this time of loss. I renew the commitment of my Government to do all in our power to assist all those of you who have been affected.

Dominicans, friends, well-wishers, Tropical Storm Erika caused a major setback to the progressive development of our country.

We pointed out clearly in the 2014 Manifesto of the Dominica Labour Party and in the subsequent budget presentation that the productive sectors, infrastructural development and the social sectors are critical to the sustainable development of Dominica. The reality is that these sectors were all battered by this adverse weather system.

In order to get back to where we were before Tropical Storm Erika struck, we have to source at least US\$88.20 million for the productive sectors, US\$334.55 million for Infrastructure and US\$60.09 million for the Social sectors.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have been forced to go back to the drawing board and rethink our entire strategy. A considerable amount of time and energy has gone into reassessing needs, drawing up new priorities, and strategically realigning our fundraising and expenditure, to keep Dominica afloat.

We have had to revise the strategic objectives as presented in the 2015/16 Budget Address indicating the target of 5% economic growth; reduction of unemployment from 15% to 11% by 2015; and the target of poverty reduction from 28% to 15% by 2020.

Similarly, the substantial damage caused by the storm to our many roads and bridges, has set back planned infrastructural development projects and programmes. The way forward is therefore to review what was planned, against what is needed, and decide on priorities within those needs. Since efforts and energies are to be concentrated on rebuilding and rehabilitation, some elements of implementation of the Public Sector Investment Programme will have to be deferred.

Expert technical advice was solicited in planning the resettlement of affected communities, particularly those of Dubique and Petite Savanne, to ensure that all factors including social and psycho-social were considered. I can report that a number of interventions have been made including site visits and assessments to determine the suitability of those sites identified for relocation.

The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela pledged to make available 300 houses to us for the relocation effort; 50 of which have already been received. I am pleased to announce that preliminary works have been undertaken and the construction of the foundations for those homes has begun.

With respect to national, physical development and land use planning, Government will place greater emphasis on the National Land Use Policy approved by Cabinet in May 2015. Hence, completion of the National Physical Development Plan (NPDP) and the Public Education and Communication Strategy (PECS) has assumed higher levels of priority.

During the storm, significant damage was also inflicted on the housing stock in various communities across the island. However, in record time, volunteers, coordinated by various Ministries, succeeded in relocating citizens made homeless by the storm, to shelters and secured alternative accommodation with residents of various communities; including the evacuated residents of Dubique, Petite Savanne and Paradise Valley.

As of 27th October, there were 136 individuals living in four guesthouses; 153 in Government designated shelters and 26 at the Mount Carmel Home in Morne Daniel. These efforts have also been supported by the provision of relief supplies to all shelters, affected communities and individuals, with the contributions Government received from individuals, groups, organisations, governments and countries, both regionally and internationally.

The biggest public health challenge following Tropical Storm Erika was the lack of access to potable water. However, by October 21st, the Dominica Water and Sewage Company Limited (DOWASCO) reported that 86% of water systems has been restored, thus providing water to about 93% of the population.

Ladies and gentlemen, notwithstanding the challenges posed by Erika, all is not lost.

With regards to Agriculture, despite the considerable damage to feeder roads, and to crops in the field, this sector is showing very good and encouraging signs of recovery post Tropical Storm Erika, and I am encouraged by the early signs of resilience of our farmers.

Reports indicate that the sector is maintaining levels of coffee, cocoa and banana production. We are still on target to complete the abattoir; using this as a stimulus to increasing poultry and livestock production.

Recently, the Cabinet held a dialogue on agriculture with our farmers and other key stakeholders with a view to developing a post Erika strategy on Agriculture. Shortly, your Government will outline a series of initiatives, emanating from that event, which should greatly assist the farming community and ultimately boost agricultural production for domestic consumption and export.

Over the years, this Government has rolled out a number of initiatives to promote and sustain business enterprise as the best response to economic disruption, stagnation and unemployment and there is a growing success in this sector. Post-Erika, we will be placing special emphasis on business enterprise development with particular consideration to our present and potential entrepreneurs in affected communities.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the passage of Tropical Storm Erika also negatively impacted the education sector. The reopening of schools, which was originally scheduled for September 1, 2015, had to be undertaken on a phased basis.

By October 5, all schools were reopened, albeit that Petite Savanne Primary and Pioneer Prep students have been temporarily accommodated at other schools.

I can report to you, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, much of the tourism sector is back to normal or regular activity, given the collaborative work of Government and private sector stakeholders to tackle hindrances to visitor experience and satisfaction.

During times of crisis, the family of nations goes over and beyond, to lend a hand to citizens of other nations who are in need. So too, individuals throughout the world open their hearts, homes and share their personal resources, to assist people from distant lands. I continue to be moved by the hands of friendship and the generosity of countries, organisations and individuals from around the globe during our time of need.

To date forty-nine countries, ten multi-lateral organizations, and fifty two NGO's, diaspora groups, private companies and individuals outside of Dominica, have responded to appeals for assistance, with offers that include cash donations; relief supplies; technical expertise and Search and Rescue assistance.

As at November, 2nd, 2015, Government had received EC\$16 million in emergency cash assistance. The donations came from a wide cross-section of agencies, institutions, countries and individuals, ranging from the most developed countries in the world to a young school girl in Montserrat.

I wish to give the assurance to all those who have contributed to our efforts at response; and now recovery and rebuilding, that every dollar will be well spent and accounted for.

As you will appreciate, this is merely a fraction of the estimated 1.3 million EC dollars needed to address the damage. We have also to be mindful that since Tropical Storm Erika, other countries have experienced natural disasters.

I should caution you, my dear fellow Dominicans, that although we will receive help from our development partners and friends, we cannot rely on that alone. Each and every one of us must contribute to rebuilding our country!

We Dominicans **MUST** have a positive attitude; we **MUST** put our shoulders to the wheel and we **MUST** lead the rebuilding of this country!

I am reminded of the words of John F. Kennedy - **“Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”**

Fellow Dominicans and friends, I appeal to you to join me in rebuilding our nation.

We may be hard pressed, but we are not crushed; we may have been knocked down, but we are not defeated; we may be set back, but by the grace of Almighty God, we are going to rebuild the new Dominica, and we shall rebuild it together!

In this, our 37th year of Independence, we must ask and answer these questions:

1. What can we learn from the mistakes of the past?
2. And what can we do as individuals and as a country to mitigate damage in the future?

My Brothers and Sisters, we are known to be a resilient people. Now we have to dig deeper into that resolve and use our skill-set to formulate strategies for rebounding from this experience.

We have a general framework and a plan for building the new Dominica. This is embedded in the spirit and content of the Growth and Protection Strategy and the 2014 Manifesto of the Dominica Labour Party; the national discussion it sparked and **that** renewed determination that Tropical Storm Erika triggered in us.

That framework is grounded in the profound realization that no matter how noble our intentions, we cannot deliver on our promises and programmes, unless we have the resources to do so.

Therefore, in moving forward, we must continue to create equal opportunities for economic empowerment. Since Independence, we have invested heavily in education and training for our children and young people.

More recently we have made that education more relevant by including technical, vocational and business components. Every young Dominican now has access to primary, secondary and tertiary level education.

We have even gone further in providing packages of support for potential entrepreneurs to help more Dominicans spot business opportunities and capitalize on them; or just become more thoughtful and productive workers. We have now to call all this training, experience and exposure, into action.

We must continue our efforts in greening the economy. It is abundantly clear that our prosperity depends on using - in a sustainable way - the natural resources, with which God has blessed us.

Proper use of our land, our sea, our forests, and our sources of renewable energy has the potential to transform the lives of every Dominican. We simply must fast track efforts to exploit these given advantages!

We must continue our policy of social inclusion. The lesson we have learned from our history is that even though the resources of a country may be bountiful, unless they are equitably distributed, the masses will remain poor. The well-known policies of social inclusion that we have adopted in the Commonwealth of Dominica will ensure that what we produce will be more justly shared among our people.

As many have practiced since August 27, we have to become and remain our brother's keeper. We have to be concerned about the plight of our fellow man and be willing to lend a helping hand whenever, and however possible.

Fellow Dominicans, on this auspicious occasion, the Government of Dominica continues to recognize, support and honour Dominicans far and wide who have distinguished themselves in various fields, whether in Dominica, in the region or the wider international community.

Through these contributions they have not only made our island proud, but have strengthened our national pride and served as examples to us all.

On behalf of the Government and people of the Commonwealth of Dominica, I take this opportunity to salute and congratulate all of you the recipients of this year's national awards. This should serve as an encouragement to all of us and as a stimulus towards national service.

Brothers and sisters, fellow Dominicans, this Government shall continue to provide you with sound leadership. Tropical Storm Erika has but strengthened our resolve. I therefore give you my unwavering commitment and that of my Government, your Government, to treat the disaster triggered by Tropical Storm Erika as an opportunity to “build back better”.

Let us embrace the spirit of unity, enterprise and caring that was reawakened in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Erika. Let us work together to create a prosperous, peaceful and just Dominica.

Let us commit to rebuilding Dominica together, and let us do it **NOW**, for ourselves and for our beloved country Dominica. We have to continue to think positively and to set aside the differences that normally come in the way of the greater good of our country. At this time we need all hands on deck, irrespective of who you are.

For our school children, we need you to stay in school, learn and do well; stay away from drugs, stay away from the streets; that is your contribution towards our national development. And to all of us, this is our country and we have a duty and a responsibility to it because it has invested all that we have in ourselves.

I wish you, my dear brothers and sisters, a Happy Independence and may God continue to bless each one of you. May God bless each of you. May God bless our beautiful country, Dominica.

Thank you. God bless you.