

Need, not greed

By HE SHEIKH PROFESSOR ALH DR YAHYA A.J.J. JAMMEH

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GAMBIA



ALH DR YAHYA A.J.J. JAMMEH

became leader of the Gambia in 1994 after a bloodless coup, following a career in the Gambia National Gendarmerie where he rose to the rank of Colonel. He was elected as president two years later. He founded the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction as his political party and was subsequently re-elected in 2001 and in 2006.

Despite the downside of colonialism and the widely held views on its negative consequences, I believe that the emergence of the Commonwealth from the vestiges of the British Empire is one of the most important positive outcomes of the colonial era. The Commonwealth provides a platform for member states both small and large to present ideas to tackle the world's daunting challenges and envisions a global socio-political and economic environment which is grounded on mutual respect, cultural diversity, and shared values to promote Universal Peace and development for humanity.

At our last CHOGM engagement in Kampala in 2007, we declared as our highest priority the promotion of democracy and development. Indeed this is critical but we risk becoming irrelevant if as a body we do not focus more on conflict resolution and peace building. Increased synergy on the search for peace is one of the most important building blocks to good governance and sustained development. This point cannot be overemphasised in our world today, engulfed by wars and civil strife, particularly in the West African sub-region. Out of my strong conviction for peace and love for humanity, as President and Head of Government, I took up the challenge to restructure and reform government institutions to respond to the needs and aspirations of the people. Following a revolution in 1994, which briefly interrupted the country's so-called democratic process, I called for quick restoration of a genuine multi-party system in 1996, with the holding of Presidential elections followed by National Assembly elections in 1997, completing the cycle of democracy. On the path to a maturing democracy, the 1970 Constitution of the first Republic was replaced by the 1997 Constitution of the Second Republic through a referendum. The new Constitution ushered in a much needed reform of the electoral system, established the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), and the Office of the Ombudsman, paved the way for a new Local Government Act, strengthened the Judiciary and National Audit Office (NAO) and established presidential commissions of enquiry as and when necessary, to investigate government officials suspected or accused of corruption. In a nutshell, we introduced greater transparency and people-friendly policies in government, all aimed at improving the quality of life for the Gambian populace.

Another core priority championed by the

Commonwealth in both the Singapore and Harare Declarations is development. Clearly, all the Achievements in terms of reform and institutional building will remain fragile unless they are backed by a clear programme of interventions aimed at strong macro-economic stability, debt sustainability, investment in growth, poverty reduction, food self-sufficiency, education and health. This is in accordance with the Gambia's experience. Indeed, economic growth is a prime determinant of poverty reduction in the long term. However, in order to spur stable economic growth in the medium term, it is imperative to adhere to structural reforms, fiscal discipline and commitment. We all know that peoples of the world have become disillusioned with the promises of democracy, due mainly to the lack of equal opportunities and access to the basics of life; the growing gap between the haves and have-nots; unfair trade practices; unfulfilled promises and pledges of the G8, as well as the ever increasing north-south divide. To add to the catalogue of injustices, the current economic meltdown sweeping across the globe is essentially making the achievement of some critical MDGs for some countries a distant dream. In my view, these are key causes of the problem constituting the springboards for military interventions and civil wars in our part of the world, while in the so-called developed countries, very low voter turnout for regular elections calls into question the legitimacy of governments.

As an important institution of the world, the Commonwealth leaders need to delve into these problems and deal with their root causes. It is important to put them at the forefront of our collective endeavours. More often than not, summits are basically preoccupied with the effects of the problems. For instance, a great deal of precious time is sometimes spent on whether or not sanctions are imposed on one country or another instead of addressing the issues to figure out how to bring them back from the brink of disaster.

In conclusion, I want to avail myself of this opportunity to reach out to my colleagues to come up with strategies to eradicate hunger, illiteracy and disease from the masses of the Commonwealth. We know that there are enough resources to cater for everybody, provided they are carefully harnessed and fairly distributed. The wise words of the late Mahatma Gandhi in the last century cannot be more relevant in this contemporary world: "There are adequate resources in the world to meet everybody's need but not everybody's greed".