



Building an international presence

INTERVIEW WITH H.E. JAMES MICHEL

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SEYCHELLES

Please explain the key role you played in bringing together the international community to tackle the problem of piracy in the Indian Ocean.

My Government is committed to coordinating international efforts and seeking greater participation by all countries in terms of assets, resources and to highlight the adverse effects of piracy on small island states such as Seychelles. We have also been at the forefront of prosecuting pirates by framing new antipiracy laws and formulating partnerships with the Somali authorities to return convicted pirates to that country.

We have undertaken these initiatives despite the tremendous strain on our limited resources. A year after I signed a memorandum of understanding with British Prime Minister David Cameron at 10 Downing Street to create a regional anti-piracy centre in collaboration with the UK, we have completed the centre and are now also focusing on tackling transnational crime, which forms part of a wider Maritime Crime Fusion Centre hosted in Seychelles. We are working to eliminate criminal networks in the region and bringing to justice the beneficiaries of transnational illegal activities.

Would you agree that until the piracy issue arose, contacts and relations between the UK and Seychelles had lapsed to some extent?

We have always known that the UK was committed to retaining strong ties with Seychelles, and the UK's continued support for Seychelles has served to deepen the friendship between our two countries. I was pleased to meet HRH Prince Charles on the margins of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo, where we discussed ways in which we can tackle urgent challenges concerning climate change and environmental conservation. We have also succeeded in raising our international profile due to the success of the economic reforms we began implementing in 2008. The international community has been impressed by our performance, good work, and progress. Annual economic growth is now 6 per cent, and the country has been able to cut its debts now that we have re-established our credibility. If you are a small country like ours, you have to fight to survive, this means adapting change, and fitting in with the rest of the world. You cannot operate in isolation, you have to show what one can do. We have promoted Seychelles and made our presence felt internationally. We have shown that even

a small country in the middle of an ocean, like ours, has a contribution to make to peace and stability.

Is Seychelles' bid for a UN Security Council non-permanent seat part of the strategy to raise the country's profile?

I believe that Seychelles can bring a unique perspective to the work of the UN Security Council. We have demonstrated our readiness for this possibility by playing a leading role in the fight against piracy and for the advancement of peace and stability in Somalia. More recently, our mediation efforts in resolving the crisis in Madagascar have been internationally recognized by our partners. And we shall continue to provide the leadership and the support that are required in this important process.

Seychelles diplomatic efforts to champion the causes of small islands states as well as the need to protect the environment, have firmly established firmly our credibility for our proposed contribution to the high-level forum that is the United Nations.

It would be naïve to pretend that we live in a just multilateral system. We have made great strides but many inequalities remain. Many iniquities continue. Humanity remains confronted by poverty, wars, conflicts, poverty, disease, injustice. We have become so blasé towards them, so inured to them, that more often than not they merit just a passing mention in the international media. Yet, we can make a difference. We have values that we can share with, and impart, to the rest of the world. These values are firmly anchored in our abiding faith in the inherent goodness and fairness of humanity.

Given its strategic location, Seychelles has attracted the attention of China, India and Russia, who are all expanding their presence in the Indian Ocean. However, the United Kingdom remains a major source of investment for the Seychelles. How would you like trade relations between the UK and Seychelles to develop?

I do not believe in asking for something for nothing: Seychelles is looking for partnerships. Ever since independence 38 years ago, we have been investing in the welfare of our nation. All our money, and the assistance we have received from partners overseas, has been well spent on education, health, decent housing and infrastructure. We were determined to move

The UK's continued support to Seychelles has served to deepen the friendship between our two countries

We believe that we have created a business climate that can offer British companies a secure, stable environment to work with our companies in key areas

Seychelles from an economic backwater to a middle-income country. We are a nation of opportunities. We spend on education and learning, giving young people and professionals the chance to develop themselves and increase their knowledge.

So we believe that we have created a business climate that can offer British companies a secure, stable environment to work with our companies in key areas such as tourism, fishing, financial services, back-room operations, and other high-tech areas.

Seychelles' success lies in the new business environment: there are about 600 new small businesses today, thanks to loans from government and concessionary credit from banks.

Seychelles co-hosted the Blue Economy Summit in Abu Dhabi in 2014. Please explain why is the concept so crucial to your approach?

As islanders, we Seychellois have an affinity with the sea that surrounds our small masses of land. The vast ocean that stretches way beyond our shores is teeming with life and wealth which, if tapped sustainably, can nurture many generations to come. Our exclusive economic zone comprises over one million square kilometres of ocean, giving Seychelles an enormous potential to develop the blue economy. The ocean is our lifeline. We earn our living from the ocean. In our endeavour to empower our people to own a greater share of our blue economy, we need to encourage joint ventures. We need foreign investment, experience and know-how. So that more of the dividends generated by the blue economy remain in the Seychelles.

In what ways do you think Seychelles still needs to improve and develop?

We live in a changing world, we have to change with the world, and for us that means becoming an entrepreneurial society. And that will require changing our mindset, and thinking more entrepreneurially, of not being so dependent on the state. We have to create wealth to be able to provide wealth, it is the private sector that creates wealth, so we have to help the private sector. We have to motivate people so that they feel able to move away from dependence. The other component is increasing our visibility and our contribution to making the world a better place

Economic reform has brought many challenges and sacrifices for our people, but things are getting better. One of the main challenges is sustaining the reforms and making the remaining changes work without a negative effect on our people. Today there are more resources in the country, and people have realised that many successes have been achieved.

With a more educated population, there are greater demands for transparency. There is greater debate and exchange of ideas, and consequently an increased sense of scrutiny. In a vibrant democracy where government actions are scrutinized by half a dozen political parties and movements, three daily newspapers, three weeklies and other stakeholders, we have to deliver and always look for ways to improve. People have to know where their money is being spent, and see the tangible results of the investments. We have established the tradition of good economic management and good governance. F



HRH Prince Charles has commended the Seychelles for its ground-breaking environmental protection policies