

Surinam seeks independent path

Surinam, a little-known nation in the Northeast corner of South America, celebrated three years under new rule this February. Largely unknown until recent months, Surinam has become a frequent topic of the U.S. press and an even more frequent target of the U.S. government.

Surinam covers an area of 66,300 square miles and has a population of 385,000 people of various races, cultures and religions—descendants of Dutch settlers and of African slaves; immigrants from India, Indonesia, China, Europe and Lebanon, and a small number of Amerindians.

The Netherlands took possession of Surinam (then former Dutch Guiana) in the 17th century. So rich was the area that they preferred to give up Manhattan and retain their holdings in South America. The Dutch traders successfully built a sugar economy, based on slaves, in spite of constant rivalry with Britain, which took over what is now the Republic of Guyana. During the 18th and early 19th centuries, The Netherlands imported sugar, coffee and cotton from Surinam.

The slaves were not accepting of their role and there were so many slave revolts during the 18th century that the Dutch colonizers were forced to negotiate with the runaway slaves and grant them freedom. The continuous uprisings made colonization of the interior impossible and the Dutch turned their attention to Indonesia, which was a more favorable environment for exploitation.

During the 20th century Surinam became a country of small farmers, established mostly on the banks of the large rivers. Descendants of runaway slaves lived in the jungle; descendants of Indians and Indonesians on the west coast; the Creole population in the major city, Paramaribo. After World War II the export of bauxite (90 percent of Surinam's export) and the development of rice-growing developed a new working class and inspired a move to the city.

Limited self-rule began in 1949 and independence was granted in 1975. Following independence the Netherlands and the United States retained control over foreign trade, the natural resources and the media. The complexity of the ethnic, cultural and religious groups divided the people—usually along religious lines—and deterred the building of national unity.

Surinam's population is one-third Creole, one-third East Indian, and the remainder Indonesian, Chinese, Lebanese, U.S. and European. The official language is Dutch, but it is spoken only by the upper class. En-



DESI BOUTERSE

glish, French, Portuguese, Spanish and several dialects are also used. A language that derives from several of these languages—Sranantongo is widespread. Because it is necessary to have a common language, Spanish is now required in the schools.

On February 25, 1980, sixteen members of the military led by Sgt. Major Desi Bouterse overthrew the government and set up a new government headed by Dr. Henk Chin A. Sen which included several political parties and social groups.

This government became involved in corruption so the military leaders placed four military officers, including Bouterse, in charge.

In November, 1981, a new party, the Revolutionary Front, was formed, and Surinam joined the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations and the Socialist International.

Currently there is a mixed civilian-military cabinet. Bouterse has said elections will be held in the future.

A national committee with representatives from various sectors of the population has been formed to submit proposals for a new government structure. This is the basis for broad public discussions taking place from March 15th to 31st, aimed at developing a new constituent assembly and a new constitution.

The announcement of this plan in November was followed by rightist opposition and an attempted coup. The Dutch press revealed the presence of U.S.-based camps where mercenaries and exiles are being trained for an attack on Surinam.

In January, 1983, a plot to overthrow the government was discovered and 21 persons arrested. Among them was one of the four government leaders, who hanged

himself in his jail cell. Others were reportedly killed when they attempted an escape—an incident highly publicized in the U.S. press and used as a reason to label the Surinam government as unjust.

Problems imposed by the U.S. and The Netherlands include attempts to impose an economic blockade; boycotting of unloading of bauxite from Surinam; termination of aid for development programs; and encouragement of mercenary invasions.

Surinam has broken the blockade by strengthening ties to other Latin American and Caribbean nations; improved health care; reorganized the educational system; strengthened the economy and limited the influence of multinationals.

The government has also built 2,000 new homes, increased pensions; instituted free health care; nationalized the timber industry and developed a fishing fleet.

In his speech at a mass rally on February 25th, Bouterse said, "This government is a government for the working class." The course of the Revolutionary Front is to free Surinam from foreign domination and create a new, more just, society.

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