

# REPORT OF THE WISMAR, CHRISTIANBURG AND MACKENZIE COMMISSION

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE - by Editor - Odeen Ishmael

The Report of the Wismar, Christianburg, Mackenzie Commission, termed the "Wismar Report", was the result of the enquiry of a Commission appointed in September 1964 by the Governor of British Guiana, Sir Richard Luyt. It was given the task to investigate the causes of the racial violence on 25 May 1964 by Africans against the minority East Indian population residing in Wismar, Christianburg and Mackenzie, the bauxite mining communities in the upper Demerara River, 65 miles south of Georgetown. In the course of these attacks, a number of Indians were murdered, scores of others brutally beaten and injured, and women and girls publicly raped. These violent acts were accompanied by large scale arson which saw the destruction of more than 200 houses and business places owned by Indians.

Very little was done by the Police and the British Guiana Volunteer Force to protect the East Indian population at those locations, and it was not until a contingent of British soldiers arrived on the scene late in the evening that there was an ease in the attacks. More than 3000 East Indians were, within a few days after, evacuated by the

security forces from the area and taken to Georgetown. Most of them, soon after, re-settled in the coastal villages, but a small number, probably feeling satisfied that the presence of British troops in the area assured a state of security, decided to return to the area to continue their employment in the bauxite industry.

The members of the Commission concluded that the disturbances were politically and racially inspired. They noted that "the thorough destruction of East Indian property, and the fact that the security forces were in no case able to apprehend arsonists, force us to conclude that the destruction . . . was organised, and well organised".

In the aftermath of these horrible occurrences, Mrs. Janet Jagan, the Minister of Home Affairs, tendered her resignation from her ministerial post. She cited the non-cooperation of the Commissioner of Police who refused to obey her instructions given early on the afternoon of 25 May for reinforcements, including British troops, to be sent to the area to protect life and property. **Mrs. Jagan's statement in the Senate** on 1 June 1964 explaining the reasons for her resignation accompanies the Wismar Report.

But despite the presence of British troops in the area, a state of violence broke out again on the evening of 6 July 1964 when a passenger launch, the *Sun Chapman*, travelling on the Demerara River from Georgetown to Mackenzie was completely destroyed by a huge explosion not far from its destination. More than 36 persons, all Africans, died in this mishap. When the news of this incident reached Mackenzie, many Africans there, assuming that the launch was bombed by Indians, became highly enraged, and in acts of reprisal, they brutally attacked Indians in the town. Five of them died as a result while many others were suffered injuries. Some of these Indians were among those who returned to the area believing that their security was guaranteed by the presence of the British soldiers. **The medical officer of the Mackenzie Hospital, Dr. C. Davies-Webb, wrote a report** in his medical journal about the *Sun Chapman* explosion giving details of the attacks that occurred later that evening.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMISSION**

#### **I. Appointment**

YOUR EXCELLENCY\* on Monday 28th September, 1964, in a Supplement to the *Official Gazette* appointed this Commission under the Commissions of Inquiry Ordinance, Chapter 59, to inquire into the recent disturbances at WISMAR-CHRISTIANBURG, and MACKENZIE. The Commissioners appointed then were: -

- (1) Sohan Roopan Singh (Chairman)
- (2) Dr. Harold Drayton
- (3) Rev. Alexander Sutherland MacDonald
- (4) Dr. Subhan Ali Ramjohn.

Mr. William Beekie was appointed Secretary to the Commission.

*The terms of reference were:*

(a) To enquire into the recent disturbances which took place at Wismar, Christianburg and Mackenzie in the Demerara River, to investigate the conduct of the Security Forces during the said disturbances and to determine the number of deaths and the extent of injury, loss and damage suffered in the said disturbances and to report thereon; and

(b) to furnish to the Governor a full statement of the proceedings of the Commission and of the reasons leading to the conclusions reported.

*[Editor's Note: \* Sir Richard Luyt, Governor of British Guiana]*

#### **II. First Meeting**

On Wednesday 28th October, Mr. Sohan Ropan Singh was informed that he would be relieved of his magisterial duties as from Monday the 2nd November, 1964 so that he might preside over the Inquiry.

The first meeting took place on the 31st October, 1964. Mr. S. Ropan Singh and Rev. Alexander S. MacDonald were present. We were informed that Dr. Harold Drayton was ill and Dr. S. Ramjohn was unable to attend. We were also told that Mr. Sugrim Singh, Barrister-at-law would be Counsel to the Commission.

Owing to the fact that displaced persons were settled all over the Colony, but mostly on the coastlands, and having regard to the easy accessibility of Georgetown, the Commission decided to hold the Inquiry in Georgetown. The office and place for hearing evidence was at 252 Thomas and Murray Streets, Georgetown.

We decided that before hearing the evidence we would first visit Mackenzie, Wismar and Christianburg area so that members could gain some impression of its terrain, those parts in which the disturbances took place, of the extent of the damage and a general picture of the social and economic conditions of the area.

### **III. Visit to Mackenzie**

On Friday 6th November, 1964, Mrs. Savithri Devi Mootoo was appointed as a member of the Commission vice Dr. S. Ramjohn who has resigned, and on the same day at 8.15 a.m. Mr. S. Ropan Singh, Rev. A.S. MacDonald, Mrs. Mootoo, Mr. Beekie and Mr. Sugrim Singh left by plane for Mackenzie.

At Mackenzie we were met by Superintendent Oscar Carmichael of the British Guiana Police Force who was then in charge of Division "E" Mackenzie, Major Langham, Officer Commanding "D" Company, British Guiana Volunteer Force at Mackenzie, Major Shearboorn of the British Army, the Queen's Own Buffs, and Mr. John Carter, Q.C. Counsel for the Demerara Bauxite Company. Although we would have welcomed the presence of the District Commissioner, the officer responsible for the civil administration of the Wismar-Christianburg area, he was not present nor was he represented by anyone.

We were taken on a tour of the area by Superintendent Carmichael, Major Langham and Mr. Carter. At Mackenzie, the Commissioners visited the Trade School, the sports club and the Police station where the evacuees had been accommodated, before being taken to Georgetown. We also visited Cara Cara and Rainbow City where houses had been destroyed. At Wismar we were taken from the Police station in two jeeps to tour the Wismar-Christianburg area. Much of the roadway consisted of deep sandy ruts and potholes, and some parts of the area were uphill. In order to reach the Valley of Tears, our party had to proceed on foot since there was only a pathway. We mention this so as to give some idea of the terrain of much of the area. We visited Silvertown, Wismar Housing Scheme, One Mile, Half Mile, Valley of Tears, Silver City, Sections A, B, C Christianburg. We saw the ruins of burnt out premises and were shown spots where persons had been found dead.

After lunch at the Government rest house at Christianburg, we returned to Mackenzie where Dr. Davies-Webb showed us all the facilities available in the Mackenzie Hospital which had been utilised to the full in the treatment of the injured evacuees. Before leaving for Georgetown at about 8.00 p.m. we visited the residential area of Richmond Hill and the Mackenzie Hotel.

Our thanks are due to Superintendent Carmichael, Major Langham and Mr. Carter, Q.C. as well as to the caretaker of the Christianburg rest house.

On Saturday 7th November, 1964, the Commissioners met at the office and were informed by counsel of the procedure which he suggested should be adopted in the examination of the witnesses. The following is an extract of the procedure to which we adhered throughout the private and public sessions of the Inquiry:

1. All witnesses' statements and documents to be submitted by counsel who shall present what he deems necessary. Any person or his representative may apply to the Commission if not satisfied with counsel's decision not to present any evidence offered by that person or persons.

2. Counsel will first examine the witness after which he can be examined by interested parties. Counsel may then re-examine the witness if necessary.

3. The same procedure would be adopted in private sittings.

At this meeting it was also agreed that an advertisement should be placed in the daily newspapers. Counsel would be allowed one week to complete the preparatory work so that public sessions of the Inquiry could commence on the 16th November at 9.00 a.m. The advertisements did not appear, however, until 11th November and it was subsequently agreed that the last date for the submission of statements, memoranda, etc. would be 28th November, 1964.

#### **IV. The Sittings**

The Commissioners began the hearing of evidence from members of the public on Monday 16th November, 1964, at 9.00 a.m. On this date Dr. Drayton was well enough to join us, and from then until its conclusion, all the members of the Commission participated in the work of the Inquiry.

The legal appearances were as follows:

(1) Mr. Hugh Shepherd, Barrister-at-Law, appeared for the British Guiana Police Force and the British Guiana Volunteer Force.

(2) Mr. Gilbert Farnum, Barrister-at-Law, appeared for the British Army. (Mr. Shepherd held the brief for Mr. Farnum throughout the Inquiry).

(3) Mr. John Carter, Q.C. appeared for the Demerara Bauxite Company Ltd.

At a later stage of the Inquiry, Mr. P.N. Singh, Barrister-at-Law associated with Mr. Hafiz Khan, appeared for the displaced persons, and Mrs. A. Khan instructed by Mr. J. Edward DeFreitas appeared as counsel for the Hand-in-Hand Insurance Company.

Colonel R. King, the British Guiana Garrison Commander, Colonel C. DeFreitas, Commanding Officer, British Guiana Volunteer Force, Mr. P.G. Owen, Commissioner of Police, Mr. D.F. Macorquodale, Secretary of the Demerara Bauxite Company Limited, who were all present at the commencement of the first day's sitting, assured the Commissioners of their cooperation. Mr. Oscar Hobbs, Assistant Superintendent of Police who was the officer in charge of "E" Division, Mackenzie, was present at the Inquiry.

The first day's sessions were from 9.00 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. and 1.00 p.m. to 3.30 p.m., but on subsequent days until the end of the hearings on 9th December, 1964, there was only one session from 8.30 a.m. until 1.00 p.m. The Commission was in session for 19 days, in the course of which 86 witnesses were examined, six were heard in camera and eight were recalled for further examination.

At the commencement of the Inquiry no objection was taken to the building or other arrangements by anyone, although the Commissioners felt that better accommodation, staff and office equipment could have been made available to the Commission, if someone with knowledge and/or forethought had been made responsible for making arrangements for the Inquiry. Initially only four stenographers and a tape recorder were supplied for the taking of the stenographic record but by the end of the second day it was clear that these would be inadequate, if transcripts of each day's proceedings were to be furnished to counsel and to members of the Commission in the shortest possible time. This was explained at a meeting on Wednesday, 18th November, to those officials of the Ministry of Development and Planning who had been put in charge of the domestic and technical arrangements of the Commission. Your Commissioners were informed that the political interpretation placed on our terms of reference had made it very difficult to secure suitably qualified staff from Departments of the Public Service, the heads of which had either refused or had been very reluctant to release members of their clerical staff on secondment. This attitude of non-cooperation with a Commission appointed by Your Excellency to enquire into a national disaster we found very difficult to understand. Eventually, additional staff and office equipment were made available to the Commission, but by this time a backlog of

work had accumulated which resulted in considerable delay in the preparation of copies of statements by witnesses before they gave evidence, and of the transcripts of evidence taken.

It is with regret that we have to report that Mr. Sugrim Singh, counsel to the Commission, became ill on 19th November and was unable to assist any further with the onerous task of the examination of witnesses. We learn at the time of writing that Mr. Singh has not completely recovered from his illness and wish to record our appreciation of his services to the Commission in the initial stages and our sincere wish for a speedy recovery.

Until Friday 27th November, when Mr. B. Ramsaroop was appointed to act for Mr. Sugrim Singh, our Chairman, with the consent of the legal representatives, examined witnesses who had previously submitted statements to the Secretary of the Commission. It is regrettable that in a matter of such national importance the Commission did not have the benefit of the services of a more experienced counsel soon after Mr. Sugrim Singh became ill.

During the, course of the Inquiry an article appeared in the Evening Post of 18th November, 1964. The Commissioners instructed the Secretary, Mr. Beekie, to write to the Director of Public Prosecutions drawing his attention to the article and requesting him to take any necessary action he deemed fit. An acknowledgement was received from him on the 14th January 1965.

On November 24th, Mr. Shepherd took objection to and tendered a statement attributed to the Premier's Office. The Secretary of the Commission wrote to the Premier's Secretary and received a reply. The article in the Evening Post, the letter to the Director of Public Prosecutions and his reply, the statement from the Premier's Office, the letter sent to the Premier's Secretary and the reply are all published in Appendix 1\* of this report.

***[Editor's Note: \* Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 which form part of the original report of the Commission are not included in this internet edition.]***



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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RECENT DISTURBANCES AT WISMAR-CHRISTIANBURG-MACKENZIE**

#### **I. Background**

The Colony of British Guiana was in a state of unrest during the time of the disturbances in the Wismar-Christianburg-Mackenzie area - May 1964.

A strike had been called in the sugar industry by the Guyana Agricultural Workers Union [G.A.W.U.] to enforce their demand for recognition as the bargaining agent for the majority of the workers in that industry. The Sugar Producers' Association [S.P.A.] had for many years recognised the Man Power Citizens' Association [M.P.C.A.] which refused to agree to the holding of a poll among sugar workers to settle the question.

This strike must be regarded in the context of the division which had developed in recent years between the East Indians, the majority of whom supported the People's Progressive Party [P.P.P.] led by Dr. Cheddi B. Jagan and the majority of the Africans in the population who supported the P.N.C. [People's National Congress] led by Mr. Forbes Burnham. While the G.A.W.U. was the "industrial arm" of the P.P.P., the President of the M.P.C.A., Mr. Richard Ishmael, was against the P.P.P. and seemed to enjoy the mutual confidence and support of the P.N.C. and Mr. Burnham.

Although the strike which commenced in February 1964 was peaceful at first, as time dragged on with no solution in sight tempers flared, and there were clashes between strikers and non-strikers, especially after the employment of Africans as strike breakers. When two non-strikers were killed by a bomb blast at Tain on the Corentyne Coast, and a G.A.W.U. supporter squatting at the entrance of Leonora Sugar Factory was crushed to death by an estate tractor, both sides claimed their martyrs. Following these incidents, the violence was intensified over the greater part of the

East and West Coast of Demerara. Many people were murdered and there were numerous cases of arson and bombings.

The murder of a negro couple at Buxton on Thursday 21st May had its repercussions in attacks on East Indians and their property in the streets of Georgetown on the afternoon of Friday 22nd May. Violence had reached such a pitch that Your Excellency was advised by the Government to declare a state of emergency on that evening. Three days later, on Monday 25th May, the violence which had until then been confined to the coastal strip was extended to the Wismar-Mackenzie-Christianburg area resulting in widespread disturbances which it has been our task to investigate.

## **II. The Wismar-Christianburg-Mackenzie Area**

Christianburg, the first settlement, is about 60 miles up the Demerara River, on its left bank, and immediately north of Wismar. It was originally owned by a Scottish family by the name of Patterson who carried on a sawmilling business. Because of legal action involving the Pattersons, Sproston Ltd. and Government, Government took over Christianburg and those lots which they did not require they sold to settlers. The former "great house" is still used to this day as the Government rest house, in which a magistrate's court serving a population of over 18,000 is held once per month. Christianburg is divided into Sections A, B, C - Section A being nearer to Wismar. (Roth's *Pepperpot*, 1958.)

In 1916, the Demerara Bauxite Company was incorporated and registered in Georgetown to exploit the bauxite resources which had been discovered by George Bain Mackenzie on the eastern bank of the river opposite Christianburg. The Company acquired titles to several parcels of bauxite-bearing free-hold land along the Demerara River between Christianburg and Akyma. In the same year the Demerara Bauxite Company was granted crown and Colony mining leases, covering additional areas of bauxite bearing land in the same district. The first mining operations were undertaken in 1917.

Today the Demerara Bauxite Company or "Demba" is a fully owned subsidiary of the Aluminium Company of Canada, Ltd. Demba's

operations are centred at Mackenzie and consist of two large plants and a vast mining operation with about eighty (80) miles of railway line. The company has invested in the plants, the mines, the railroads, power supply and in the township generally \$124.8 million (W.I.) and maintains a payroll of about 3,500. Its production represents about 80% of the total output of the B.G. bauxite industry. At Mackenzie the company has built up a planned residential area complete with primary and secondary schools, a 128-bed hospital, a trade school and housing facilities to accommodate many of its employees.

Wismar is in the strictest sense a satellite to the Mackenzie mining town, accommodating some of those who work at Demba and those businessmen who cater to the needs of the workers at Mackenzie. Some of those who settled at Wismar were squatters and many did not own freehold land. Part of the Wismar area is controlled by a local authority. There are also housing schemes and a cooperative for supplying electricity. In part of the area there is a potable water supply. Roads and drainage are bad.

### **III. Social and Economic Conditions**

The population of these three areas was about 18,000 in May 1964, and of these, about 3000 were East Indian, the majority of the rest being Africans. The majority of the working population were employed at Demba. Since these settlers were originally from the coastlands, some maintained contact with relatives there whilst others regarded their sojourn in the Demerara River as being only temporary, and would visit their relatives or families on the coastlands as often as once a month. A few of these people were affected by the disturbances on the East and West Coasts. Although some 350 of the East Indians were employed at Demba, the majority were businessmen who in many cases owned their places of business and their homes. Some of them owned more than one building and were engaged in more than one occupation. The majority of the Africans were wage earners.

The two major races - East Indians and Africans - lived harmoniously side by side and not in racial groups. Socially they would mix freely especially at clubs and restaurants. Inter-marriage

was not uncommon among them. The points of difference between them were economic and political.

As indicated above, the majority of the 3,000 East Indians were supporters of the P.P.P. or were so identified. The majority of the Africans were P.N.C supporters who had the satisfaction of knowing that the representative for the Upper Demerara River constituency in the House of Assembly was an African, Mr. Robert Jordan. The close ties that existed between many of the Africans at Wismar and their relatives who had been involved in racial clashes on the East and West Coasts of Demerara served to intensify animosity towards the East Indian minority. The news of the murder of the African couple - the Sealeys - at Buxton reached Wismar on Friday the 22nd May, and seems to have been the incident which precipitated the planned reprisal against the East Indians in the Wismar-Christianburg area on Monday 25th May, 1964. The economic prosperity of the East Indian community must have been a latent source of jealousy, which determined that the major aim of the attack would be the destruction of property. We shall have more to say on this point in a later section of this report.

#### **IV. The Disturbances**

During the week proceeding May 25th, 1964, there was evidence of marked tension in the Wismar-Christianburg area, but in spite of threats of beating and burning levelled against East Indians, most of these do not appear to have been taken seriously enough as to warrant a report to the Police. Although there were disturbances in British Guiana during 1962 and again during 1963, the Upper Demerara River area remained relatively calm except for one major incident in 1963 at Wismar when a shop was looted. The owner discharged a shot gun at the looters but did not injure them seriously. He had to remove from Wismar because of threats made against him.

We have attempted to construct a chronological record of the important events at Wismar from the 20th May to the early morning of the 25th May, 1964. This record is based on entries in the Occurrence Book kept at the Wismar Police Station, and on the

reports made by the Police at Wismar to Force Control, Police Headquarters, Georgetown:

*Wednesday 20.5.64*

1. Pandit Ramlackhan's house was bombed at about 2.00 a.m.

*Thursday 21.5.64*

1. A strike took place at Demba. It began in the mechanical shop and spread to other installations.

*Friday 22.5.64*

1. Daniel Persaud reported that people had set fire to his house but it was only scorched.

2. At 11.30 p.m. there was an explosion at Silvertown at the house of Ibrahim Khan and three people were injured and taken to hospital. Damage was done to the living quarters of the building.

*Saturday 23.5.64*

1. At 12.05 a.m. a bomb was thrown at the house of Walter Narine at Silvertown. No one was injured.

2. Edoo's house was seen on fire in the One Mile Area.

3. At about 2.30 a.m. fire was set on the house of Cyril Ragnauth at Cholmondeley Alley.

4. At about 10.50 p.m. Mr. Toolsie Persaud, a businessman who has a timber grant at Christianburg, and his men were going to Mr. Lam's Hotel for food and accommodation. Deodat Narine, one of his employees was beaten and acid thrown on him. He jumped into the Demerara River.

5. Mr. Lam's Hotel was pelted and looted and Mr. Toolsie Persaud and his men escaped through the back yard of Mr. Lam's premises. (They hid themselves until the next day when they travelled to Georgetown. Mr. Toolsie Persaud did not mention this incident or the situation at Wismar to anyone.)

6. At 11.30 a.m. the empty house of Joseph Gaines (East Indian ) of Half Mile Wismar was set on fire.

*Sunday 24.5.64*

1. At 1.30 a.m. Cyril Ragnauth and his wife were injured by air-gun pellets when they opened a window to investigate a noise they heard.

2. The house of Seecowathai was set on fire.
3. At 8.40 a.m. a lighted substance was thrown on the house of Basdeo Ramkumar - a piece of tarpaulin burnt.
4. At 1.00 a.m. one Singh was found unconscious in Sand Road, Wismar.
5. At 4.55 a.m. house owned by Daniel Persaud completely destroyed. It was unoccupied.
6. At 9.17 a.m. strike at Demba called off.
7. At 6.45 p.m. building owned by Alphonso Singh set on fire.
8. At 7.30 p.m. houses owned by Charles John set on fire at One Mile area. One building destroyed, the other damaged.
9. At 9.00 p.m. the other building owned by Charles John destroyed by fire.
10. At 8.30 p.m. another attempt was made on the building owned by Gaines.
11. At 8.45 p.m. Leonard Gobin was beaten in the Silvertown area.
12. At 9.00 p.m. Sukraj of Half Mile, Wismar, was beaten.
13. At 11.00 p.m. the premises owned by Sookram at Christianburg looted and destroyed by fire.
14. At 11.20 p.m. two (2) shots were fired on Roshal Alli of Silvertown. He was hospitalised.
15. The building of David Perai set on fire.

#### *Monday 25.5.64*

1. At 12.15 a.m. the unoccupied building of Sahadeo Ram completely destroyed.
2. At 1.30 p.m. unoccupied building on Blueberry Hill set on fire.
3. At 4.05 a.m. a barber shop of William Subrian pulled down and thrown in the river.

From 7.09 a.m. until 12.43 p.m. no entry was made at Force Control concerning the events at Wismar. The last record at Wismar of a message sent to Force Control was at 5.30 a.m.

During the course of our Inquiry, counsel for the security forces suggested to several witnesses that the disturbances in the Wismar-Christianburg area on May 25th, 1964, had been "spontaneous" and had taken many people by surprise. Many witnesses confirmed that the intensity of the outbreak took them by surprise, but Mr. Hobbs,

the Police Officer in charge of Wismar, gave it as his opinion that the events at Wismar had been carefully planned with such efficiency as to thwart the efforts of the security forces. The Commissioner of Police, on the other hand, opined that from subsequent reports he was sure that the outbreak had been spontaneous. This aspect of the matter will be dealt with in more detail in another chapter of this report.

Between 7 and 8 o'clock on the morning of May 25th the situation deteriorated rapidly. There was widespread violence, arson and looting. The stage was set for a day of unmitigated tragedy. At about 8.00 a.m. it was rumoured that an East Indian man had kicked an African boy. The Police subsequently investigated this but found it to be untrue. If any was needed, this was the *casus belli*.

Throughout the day, large numbers of East Indians sought refuge in the Wismar Police station compound - some were rescued by Police and Volunteers, others went there on their own. With the arrival of British troops at Mackenzie at 5.00 p.m. these people were ferried across to Mackenzie where they were accommodated at the trade school, sports club and Police station. Those who had been injured were treated and sent away or hospitalised at the Mackenzie Hospital according to the severity of the cases. On the 26th May the R.H. Carr and the M.V. Barima were made available for the transportation of evacuees to Georgetown; some went by air. The presence of African policemen and Volunteers at the point of disembarkation in Georgetown caused some fear on the part of the evacuees which was only assuaged when assurances were given by officials of the B.G. Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha. The industrial site at Ruimveldt was used as a transit point for the evacuees until they could be re-settled elsewhere in the Colony.

The advent of the British troops and the imposition of a curfew helped to restore order out of chaos, but as darkness fell, fires could still be seen in the area. Sporadic attacks on Indian life and property continued, however. On the 26th May, Isaac Bridgewater, the father of Senator Christina Ramjattan, was murdered and his place burnt. Arson took place on the Mackenzie side on the 27th May, 1964, and on the 2nd June, 1964, when Indian houses at Cara

Cara were burnt. Toolsie Persaud's gasoline installation at Section C, Christianburg, was destroyed on the 25th July, 1964.

On the 6th July, 1964, an explosion occurred at Booradia on a launch named "Sun Chapman" which was taking goods and passengers, the majority of them Africans, from Georgetown to Wismar. About thirty-eight (38) persons perished in this disaster. The echo of the Sun Chapman disaster was immediately felt at Mackenzie when five East Indians were murdered and seven seriously injured. Before the official report of the Sun Chapman tragedy reached the Police and British army, Africans were on the rampage and in the space of two hours, 5.00 to 7.00 p.m., more people were killed than on the whole day of the 25th May, 1964.

Within two hours the security forces had rounded up all the East Indians working at Demba and living in or around Mackenzie; on the next day these were transported to Georgetown. In spite of the imposition of a curfew, the few remaining Indian houses at Cara Cara were destroyed or damaged. The destruction of the building which housed the Royal Bank of Canada was the last known act of violence directed against Indian property.

Those members of the Commission who visited the area did not see any East Indians except for a few in the Police Force and the Demba Constabulary.

## **V. Comment**

The violence of May 25th, although started at the river front, was at first mainly concentrated in remote areas such as Half Mile, One Mile and Valley of Tears. It was only later that large buildings such as those owned by Messrs. T. Prashad, Lalta Paul and Hakim Khan in Silvertown and Silver City were destroyed. Protection money was demanded and in some cases obtained from the owners of big business. But this did not prevent their business places being looted and burnt, subsequently, nor did it prevent them from being assaulted.

The local population in the majority supported these acts. A few of those who engaged in these acts of violence might well have come



from other parts of the country, some were undoubtedly drawn from the criminal elements who made periodic visits to the area, whilst some others were from the area. Wherever they might have come from, however, they were certainly well informed about the precise location of East Indian premises in the Wismar-Christianburg area, and were well equipped and trained for incendiarism. The local population knew how to prevent fires spreading and indeed lost no time in forming bucket brigades to save African homes. African furniture was removed from Indian houses so that the houses could be burnt.

During all this violence there was no report of an African or anyone for that matter being injured by an Indian. They were afraid that retaliation might result in a heavy toll of lives and this could have been the case. The East Indians were shocked by the sudden enmity shown by persons who had been their friends, neighbours and fellow workers.

The hilly and wooded terrain of the Wismar area made it difficult for the security forces, however conscientious, to apprehend persons engaged in arson or other crimes of violence. Neighbours and other members of the public were either afraid or were unwilling to render any assistance to the security forces. They never lent a hand to extinguish fires kindled on East Indian homes, and the very few who offered shelter to East Indians were threatened to such an extent that they had to put out the families whom they had succoured. The majority of the Africans laughed and jeered at the East Indians as blood stained and battered, raped and naked, shocked and destitute, they helplessly went their way to the only place of refuge, the Wismar Police Station. African women played their part in these events to the fullest extent.

Your Commissioners are convinced that "this was a diabolical plot, ingeniously planned and ruthlessly executed."

In the words of Mr. Festus Adams, the Village Chairman of the Wismar- Christianburg Local Authority, as he surveyed the inferno during the 25th May, it was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONDUCT OF THE SECURITY FORCES**

#### **I. The Security Forces in British Guiana**

##### **(a) The Police Force**

The British Guiana Police Force was established by the Police Ordinance of 1891 which was subsequently continued by the Police Ordinance of 1920 and is now to be found in Chapter 77 of the Laws of British Guiana. This has since been amended by the Police Ordinance of 1957. Section 60 of Chapter 77 gives the Commissioner of Police power to make regulations governing the Police Force. These rules and regulations are to be found in the Subsidiary Legislation Ordinances.

Articles 99-104 of the Constitutional Instruments govern certain matters pertaining to the Police Force. Article 101(1) states: "Power to make appointments to the Office of Commissioner of Police and to dismiss and to exercise disciplinary control over any persons holding or acting in that office shall vest in the Governor acting after consultation with the Chairman of the Police Service Commission." Article 102 of the Constitution also gives, *inter alia*, power to make appointments of officers in the Police Force of or above the rank of inspector, to the Governor acting on the recommendation of the Police Service Commission. Power to make appointments below the rank of inspector vests in the Commissioner of Police to such extent as may be prescribed by any law of the Legislature.

Mr. Peter Granville Owen became Commissioner of Police for the B.G. Police Force in September, 1962.

The men in the B.G. Police Force are predominantly Africans. The numerical strength of the entire "E" Division of the Police Force at Mackenzie was thirty-one (31). In May, 1964, they were under the command of Assistant Superintendent Oscar Hobbs. Wismar Police Station had thirteen (13) men, consisting of one sergeant, one

corporal and eleven constables. At the request of the Government, the Commissioner of Police had in 1963 carried out a review of the number of policemen in that area, and having regard to the population, he recommended that the strength of "E" Division be increased by the addition of seven men - one inspector, one corporal and five constables. There was only one vehicle at Mackenzie and he recommended that another be obtained for the Wismar area and this was done. The other recommendation was not carried out.

### **(b) The B.G. Volunteer Force**

The B.G.V.F. [British Guiana Volunteer Force] was established by the Volunteer Ordinance, Chapter 38, of the Laws of British Guiana. The Commanding Officer is Col. Celso DeFreitas, who is responsible to the Governor for the Force. The Volunteer Force is about six hundred (600) strong.

The battalion is made up of a Headquarters Company in Georgetown and four rifle Companies of which one is stationed in New Amsterdam and another at Mackenzie.

The Volunteer Force at Mackenzie, "D" Company, had one Major, three Subalterns and ninety-one (91) other ranks. Major Langham who commands "D" Company also works as Security Officer at Demba. Many of the ranks of "D" Company work and live at Wismar-Christianburg and Mackenzie and the majority of them are Africans.

On 24.5.64 at 10.00 am, authority was given for the embodiment of twenty-four (24) men of "D" Company. Orders for full embodiment of the company came at midday on 25.5.64 and by 5.00 p.m. they were all embodied under the command of major Langham.

### **(c) The British Army**

Since the disturbances of 1962 British soldiers had been in British Guiana and could be called upon in time of emergency to come to the aid of the civil power. In May, 1964, the British soldiers were under the command of Col. R. King, Commander of the B.G.

Garrison. He takes orders relating to the British forces from the Governor as Commander-in-Chief. After the declaration of the state of emergency on Friday 22nd May, 1964, additional British soldiers were flown from the United Kingdom to British Guiana.

One platoon of the British army went into operation at Wismar at about 6.00 p.m. on 25th May, 1964.

#### **(d) The Demba Constabulary**

There is at Mackenzie a hybrid force of about 90 men called the Demba Constabulary, the members of which are recruited by Demba and paid by the Company. They receive their training from the Police Force, are subject to discipline by the Commissioner of Police and can arrest for any crime committed on land or premises owned by Demba. Elsewhere they must make a report to the Police. Throughout the disturbances on May 25th, a few of these special constables were used by the Police at Wismar. They are not allowed to carry arms nor are they trained in their use.

### **II. Conduct of the Security Forces at the Scene**

On the day of the disturbances at Wismar-Christianburg there were 57 cases of assault, including rape, which were treated at the Mackenzie Hospital. Two persons were killed and at least 197 houses were destroyed in addition to several cases of looting. With the single exception of Assistant Superintendent Lashley, who in company with Lieutenant Wishart and a party of men, apprehended and shot a looter who refused to halt when ordered to do so, no member of the Volunteers or Police admitted witnessing any cases of assault or rape, looting or arson.

Several members of the Police and Volunteers who gave evidence said that they had seen large crowds of people moving up and down but committing no offence - indeed one witness described the crowd as orderly and peaceful and said that they were walking "as though going to church". On the other hand, Assistant Superintendent Lashley stated that in the course of his patrolling duties he had on one occasion dispersed a riotous crowd by the use of tear smoke. In his view the dispersal of crowds should have been one of the prime

duties of the patrols, since he observed that the assembly of a crowd in an area always heralded the start of fires and other acts of violence in that area. We would like to single out Assistant Superintendent John Lashley for special commendation for his intelligent and energetic action during the disturbances and for the forthright and unequivocal manner in which he give evidence before us.

A variety of allegations were made by witnesses against the security forces - the Police and Volunteers. These included bribery, partaking in loot, standing by and refusing to give assistance whilst rape and assault were being committed, refusing to extinguish fires, supplying gasoline to arsonists and being politically partial by telling people who were beaten and stripped to go to their political leaders.

On the other hand, members of the security forces alleged that they were on every occasion just in time to see fires beyond their control, and injured or uninjured East Indians coming out of their hiding places and in tears begging to be rescued. These persons were taken to the Police station promptly and those in need of medical treatment were sent to the Mackenzie Hospital. By noon on the 25th it became quite evident that the tide of violence could not be stemmed and it was decided by the Police to concentrate all their energies on the saving of lives rather than property.

## **Observations**

Having regard to the scale of the disturbances in the Wismar-Christianburg area on the 25th May, we believe that the handful of Police and Volunteers available for service was totally inadequate to patrol the area properly and check the violence. Had members of the public been willing to cooperate with the security forces, however, their effectiveness would have been greater, but there is evidence that members of the public actively thwarted the efforts of the Police and Volunteers by assembling in large crowds and by jeering and taunting them. No doubt also, it must have been extremely difficult for some members of the Volunteer Force who lived in the area and who were Africans, to dissociate themselves emotionally from the prevailing attitude of hostility against the Indians on that day.

It should be also borne in mind that total embodiment of the Volunteer Force was not effected until 5.00 p.m. on the 25th May. United Kingdom troops did not arrive at Wismar until about 6.00 p.m. on that day. It is a pity that the "image of the British soldier" was not sooner on the scene. We shall have more to say about this aspect of the matter in a later section of our report.

As stated above, the security forces decided after a certain stage to save lives rather than property, but we do not believe that the primary intention of these who planned this disaster was to kill East Indians.

Throughout the whole of the 25th of May only two East Indians were murdered out of an East Indian population of 3,000; one was killed on the next day. Yet after the Sun Chapman disaster on the 6th of July, within the short space of two hours, five East Indians were murdered out of the remaining East Indian population of 300.

### **III. Conduct of the Security Forces Behind the Scene**

The Commissioner of Police in the course of his evidence alleged that he had recommended verbally to the Premier since April the declaration of a state of emergency. It was not, however, until the 22nd May, 1964, that the state of emergency was declared by Your Excellency on the advice of your Council of Ministers. Just prior to the declaration of the state of emergency sections of the British Guiana Volunteer Force had been embodied by Colonel DeFreitas, acting on your instructions.

On Saturday the 23rd May, 1964, the Commissioner of Police wrote a letter to the then Minister of Home Affairs, Mrs. Janet Jagan, summarizing the general security situation throughout the Colony. In this letter he stated, inter alia:

"The violence which erupted in Georgetown yesterday found a moderate echo in Wismar. This was the case last year and I am afraid that if violence is allowed to continue in the countryside the pattern will be repeated not only in Georgetown but also in Wismar with increasing severity. The Buxton incident and racial violence generally throughout the country produced the same effect in

Wismar-Mackenzie. At 9.00 p.m., an Indian owned house was destroyed by fire at 1 Mile Wismar and at 11.40 p.m. an explosive device was set under the house of another East Indian at Silvertown, Wismar. It exploded doing damage and injuring three persons although not seriously.

We both know how serious it will be for the small East Indian minority at Wismar, Mackenzie if the Africans start retaliation there as they did last year. Elsewhere the Police enjoyed one of the quietest nights for months. (Our underlining)

"I note in His Excellency's Minute of the 22nd May, 1964, addressed to the Garrison Commander and copied to you and to me, that you had advised the Governor that you wish me to take the initiative if the physical intervention of the troops appeared to be necessary and request the Garrison Commander direct for assistance. I shall endeavour to consult you before taking such action and I shall of course keep you informed of what is happening. It would in my opinion be advantageous at this juncture to resuscitate the Security Council at which you as Minister of Home Affairs take the Chair."

From this letter it is quite clear that the Commissioner of Police was fully aware, probably on the basis of security reports which he had received, of the explosive situation at Wismar-Mackenzie, and that the East Indian minority would be in grave danger if "retaliation" commenced there. Counsel for the security forces put this point admirably when he said that it was as if the Commissioner of Police had been gazing into a crystal ball and had been able to foretell the horrible events that would come to pass.

On Sunday the 24th May, the Commissioner of Police was aware that the situation at Wismar had deteriorated considerably. At 9.00 a.m. on that day he conferred with Assistant Commissioner Puttock at Police Force Control and gave instructions for the embodiment of 24 men of the "D" Company, B.G.V.F. The officer in charge of the police at Mackenzie-Wismar, Mr. Hobbs, had requested the assistance of the Volunteers; all special constables had been called out and members of the Police Force had been ordered to go on "stand by".

On the 25th May, 1964, at about 9.00 a.m., Mr. Hobbs reported to Police Headquarters, Georgetown, that there was wide-scale looting, arson and other acts of violence at Wismar and requested the embodiment of the entire Volunteer Force. Major Langham said that the order to embody came through at about 10.00 a.m. although his diary of events mentions the order as coming through from B.G.V.F. Headquarters at 12.00 midday. Full embodiment was not completed until after 3.00 p.m.

The Commissioner of Police who had been aware of the deteriorating situation at Wismar decided to send Mr. Neil Isaacs, a "more experienced" officer to Wismar to assess the situation. Mr. Isaacs left Georgetown by chartered aircraft at 1.00 p.m. and it was not until a few minutes before 5.00 p.m. that he telephoned the Commissioner requesting that British troops be sent to the area. Your Commissioners are in no doubt whatever that had British troops reached the area earlier on the day of the 25th the major portion of the tragedy would have been averted. The question of whether the Commissioner of Police acted wisely in awaiting the report of Mr. Neil Isaacs before requesting British troops must be viewed in the light of the reports he received from Wismar throughout that day, what transpired at the Security Council meeting at 2.00 p.m., and the time necessary to get British troops into the area.

As to the nature of the reports received from Mr. Hobbs, Assistant Commissioner Puttock was extremely vague. As far as he could remember, the report which he received was "that the situation was deteriorating and that there were fires which appeared to be spreading and that there was looting." He did not mention that the East Indian community at Wismar was in serious danger. The Commissioner of Police said, "I understand buildings were burnt, attacks were made on people and they were beaten at Wismar." Major Langham said that on Sunday 24th there was a distinct deterioration of the situation and regretted that Assistant Commissioner Puttock did not agree to the embodiment of the entire Volunteer Force at Mackenzie rather than only 24 men without any officers. In his opinion, had full embodiment taken place on the Sunday, the extent of the damage and injuries which



took place on the Monday would have been considerably reduced. In any event, by 9.00 a.m. on the 25th of May the Commissioner of Police had enough information to come to the conclusion that his prediction of the 23rd May had come to pass. At about 8.00 a.m. on the 25th, a message was sent from the Demba office at Mackenzie to the Managing Director of Demba in Georgetown that the situation at Wismar was extremely serious and that more police or British soldiers should be sent immediately. Later that morning a further message was sent through to the Demba head office asking the Managing Director, Mr. Campbell, to get in touch directly with either the Commissioner of Police or the Governor, and to advise that the situation was so extremely serious as to warrant the immediate despatch of British troops without awaiting the "on the spot" assessment of Mr. Neil Isaacs. Mr. Campbell confirmed that he did speak with the deputy Governor Mr. J. Rose at about 10.30 a.m.

The Minister of Home Affairs said that at 9.00 a.m., on 25th while she was attending a meeting of the Senate, she was informed that the situation at Wismar was grave, and that at the adjournment of the Senate meeting she received further distressing information about the situation. She tried without success to contact the Commissioner of Police and it was not until 11.30 am that she managed to speak with the Assistant Commissioner, Mr. Puttock, who told her of the Commissioner's decision to send Mr. Neil Isaacs to make an on the spot assessment of the situation. At 2.00 p.m. a meeting of the Security Council was held attended by the Commissioner of Police, the Garrison Commander, the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Assistant Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs who deals with Police matters, and presided over by the Minister. The Minister informed the Council of the reports she had received concerning the situation at Wismar and requested that British troops be sent into the area immediately. The Commissioner of Police said that he would await the report of Mr. Neil Isaacs before requesting British troops. It was only after the meeting had adjourned that at about 3.00 p.m. the Commissioner requested British troops after receiving a telephone call from Mr. Isaacs.

Mr. Neil Isaacs said that upon arrival at Mackenzie he discussed the situation with Major Langham and Mr. Hobbs. He saw fires but did not make a reconnaissance tour of the Wismar area.

It is to be recalled that the Minister of Home Affairs had previously delegated her power to requisition British troops to the Commissioner of Police. This delegation of power was intended to obviate any delay in getting British troops into an area where they were needed to assist the civil power. Your Excellency had observed in your minute to the Garrison Commander of 22nd May that "the Minister's verbal request reflects a proper appreciation of the present situation in British Guiana", and instructed him that he should "on receipt of a request for aid from the Commissioner of Police act on such request." The Commissioner of Police who is in constant receipt of security reports from all over British Guiana was clearly the person who should have been expected to have his finger on the security pulse beat of the nation.

Colonel R. King, the Officer Commanding the B.G. Garrison, said in the course of evidence before us that at about 10.00 or 11.00 p.m. on Sunday 24th May he was informed by Police Force Control Georgetown that there was serious trouble at Wismar. He thereupon gave orders that one platoon of the Devon & Dorset Regiment should be put on one hour's standby notice as from 5.30 a.m. on 25th May for service in the Wismar-Mackenzie-Christianburg area. A Dakota plane was later made available for the transportation of these troops from Atkinson. The Commissioner of Police alleged that on the Sunday night, 24th May, he did not have this information about trouble at Wismar, nor did he know then that British troops would be placed on standby as from 5.30 a.m. on 25th May. We find this very difficult to understand.

We were privileged to have before us the Attorney General of British Guiana who explained the constitutional position relevant to the authority of the Minister of Home Affairs in requesting the intervention of British troops. This is what he had to say:

"The Minister of Home Affairs may ask the Governor to lend forces - the military - for the support of the civil power where the Commissioner of Police expresses the opinion that the forces under

his command are no longer able to cope with any particular situation. . . . The grant or refusal of the forces is in the discretion of the Governor. . . . I would say that the Minister who is in charge of internal security is the one from whom the request of troops should come. But I can say that the Commissioner of Police should conceivably make such a request on the Minister's authority. Since the maintenance of public safety and public order is the responsibility of the Minister of Home Affairs, that responsibility could not be exercised unless the Commissioner of Police - the head of the Police Force - is subject to the Minister's orders and instructions. Constitutionally, the Commissioner of Police was obliged to act on any request - oral or written - of the Minister of Home Affairs and, specifically, that British troops be called upon to give assistance in any area."

The Attorney General stated that this question had been one of the matters of continuous controversy in the running of the Government. The Council of Ministers had not been formally advised by the Commissioner of Police that a state of emergency should be declared until May 21st 1964.

We find that the Commissioner of Police acted without due regard to the proper constitutional position when he refused to carry out the request of the Minister of Home Affairs, that British troops be requisitioned for immediate service in the area. Having regard to the forebodings which he had expressed to the Minister in his letter of 23rd May, the reports which he must have received from Force Control on the night of 24th concerning the gathering storm at Wismar, the telephoned reports from Mr. Hobbs during the morning of Monday May 25th, and the plea from the Managing Director of Demba for intervention of British troops, we are at a loss to understand why he should have thought it necessary to follow "normal procedure" in awaiting the "on the spot" assessment by Mr. Neil Isaacs before signing the requisition for British troops to be sent to Wismar, in what was clearly an abnormal situation. We would hesitate to believe that the Commissioner of Police deliberately prevented the arrival of British troops at Wismar until the major portion of the destruction had taken place. On the most charitable view, his failure to get British troops into the area at a

much earlier hour on the 25th was a most serious error of judgment on his part, and showed his inability to comprehend and appreciate the reports which were transmitted to him. We reiterate our view that the critical factor which could have considerably reduced the casualties to life and property at Wismar on the day of the disaster was the presence of British troops.

#### **IV. Further Observations**

##### **(a) Mrs. Janet Jagan**

By about 10.00 a.m. on the 25th May, 1964, the Minister of Home Affairs was in possession of what seemed to her to be sufficient information about what was happening at Wismar as to require the immediate intervention of British troops. We consider, therefore, that after failing to contact the Commissioner of Police before noon, she should have made a formal request of Your Excellency or of the Garrison Commander for the despatch of British troops. It is unfortunate also, that after the Commissioner of Police had refused her verbal request at the Security Council meeting at 2.00 p.m. she did not attempt to confirm the exercise of her constitutional authority by signing a formal written request.

##### **(b) Mr. Robert Jordan**

Several witnesses have alleged that Mr. Robert Jordan, member of the former Legislative Assembly for the Upper Demerara River constituency, bears a major responsibility for the events of May 25th and 26th. Mr. Jordan was said to have been seen on Thursday May 21st, and again on Saturday May 23rd, inciting African people to violence against East Indians. Three witnesses said that on the Thursday he was seen with a newspaper on the public road drawing to the attention of those he met the murder of Mr. & Mrs. Sealey, African farmers of Buxton, East Coast, Demerara, and asking what the people of Wismar were going to do in reprisal for such actions by East Indians on the coast. Four witnesses claimed to have seen Mr. Jordan on the Saturday in company with various community leaders and at least one of the known criminal element, either inciting Africans or planning acts of violence against East Indians.

The Commissioners noted that those of the alleged "conspirators" who appeared before us categorically denied that they had been planning violence with Mr. Jordan or indeed that they had seen him in the area at the time in question. It is also noted that the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Sealey were found aback of Buxton on Friday May 22nd and the day **after** it was alleged that Mr. Jordan was reading about their murder from a newspaper on the Wismar public road.

Your Commissioners feel that we must express our regret that Mr. Robert Jordan did not appear before us although invited to do so, in order that the extremely serious allegations against him might have had the strenuous testing they deserve. We are thus obliged to include them for the record, without further comment.

### **(c) Mrs. Christina Ramjattan**

Mrs. Christina Ramjattan was a Senator who lived at Christianburg. On Sunday 24th May she had seen several fires in the area and had been aware of the rising tension, which was so severe, that she had to request a Police escort to the launch which brought her to Georgetown at about 1.00 a.m. on the morning of 25th May. On arrival she made no effort to contact any Police officer or any member of the Government to inform them about the worsening situation at Wismar.

She failed to bring the matter to the attention of the Senate at the Senate Meeting which she attended on 25th May, at 9.00 a.m. During the meeting she passed a note of a resolution about the situation at Wismar from the P.P.P. Constituency Committee there to Senator Janet Jagan, but she did not discuss with the Minister what she had witnessed the day before, She did make an attempt to see the Commissioner of Police but without success. She failed to see any other Police officer.

Mrs. Ramjattan confessed that on the morning of 25th May she was so very distressed at the memory of what she had witnessed the day before and by the many reports that reached her by telephone from Wismar, that she would not act properly and could think only about her property and her invalid husband whom she had left behind at Wismar.

At it turned out, the police at Wismar, though they escorted Mr. Ramjattan to the safety of the police station on 25th May, seized the shot gun which he had discharged at a would-be arsonist. This action by the police in seizing a gun from a man who was using it to defend his own property must be criticised most strongly.

Mrs. Ramjattan's father, Isaac Bridgewater, who lived in Section C, Christianburg, was murdered on 26th May. We cannot understand why the police did not evacuate all the Indians from this remote area - Section C, Christianburg - on 25th. Had they done so, Bridgewater's life would have been saved.

#### **(d) Mr. Patrick Bender**

Mr. Patrick Bender was the Assistant District Commissioner for the area during the period of the disturbances. As A.D.C. he might have been expected to have rendered active assistance to the security forces in their efforts to maintain law and order on the day in question. Instead, however, he remained throughout the day in his compound at Christianburg and did not venture forth into Wismar until two days after the 25th. Mr. Bender admitted in evidence that he had been so afraid at what he had heard of the crimes of violence and arson, and at the large number of fires which he saw from his compound, that he had instructed his men to keep the launch in readiness for prompt departure in the event of the crowds coming his way.

#### **(e) Mr. Festus Adams**

Mr. Festus Adams, "the Village Father" - Chairman of the Local Authority - travelled across to Wismar after lunch and walked around the area surveying the scene. His simple and sole reaction was to interpret what he saw as an illustration of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." After his tour of the area he returned to his home at Mackenzie for tea.

#### **(f) Mr. Albert Jairam**

Mr. Albert Jairam was the Government dispenser and Sub-Registrar of Births and Deaths in the area before he left for Georgetown on

Sunday 24th May. Although he was fully aware of the tension prevailing at Wismar and that there had been a number of cases of violence and arson on the day of his departure, he failed to make any kind of report to any responsible authority on arrival in Georgetown.

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## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ACCOUNT OF NUMBER OF DEATHS, EXTENT OF INJURIES, LOSS AND DAMAGE**

#### **(a) Deaths**

When one considers the number of East Indians evacuated, the large number of Africans in the area and the negligible opposition which the attackers encountered, the number of fatalities was indeed very small.

There were two East Indians who died on the 25th May, 1964. Richard Khan, aged about 18 years, died at the Mackenzie Hospital two hours after admission. He had been attending high school in Georgetown. The other, Pau1 Mirgin, who operated a tug, was married and lived with his wife and four sons in the Valley of Tears.

Gussie English\* an African was shot on the 25th May, 1964. He died the same day.

On the 28th May, 1964, Isaac Bridgewater was killed. He was the father of Senator Christina Ramjattan and lived at Section C, Christianburg.

On the 27th May, 1964, Byron Wharton\*, an African, died because of extensive burns suffered when he was trapped in a burning building.

Following the Sun Chapman disaster the bodies of 35 persons were taken to Mackenzie and 12 others were listed as missing or

unidentified. All of these were Africans. The Sun Chapman incident resulted in five East Indians being murdered at Mackenzie.

There are no official records of the deaths of these persons as no entry has been made in the Register of Births and Deaths. The dispenser who is also the Sub-Registrar for Births and Deaths left for Georgetown on the 24th May and never returned. His place was looted. The present dispenser did not even prepare a temporary list of deaths from the Police record pending the report from the coroner. He did not attend at the Inquiry in order to be of some assistance to the Commissioners. The Assistant District Commissioner who supervises the Sub-Registrar has done nothing to regularise the position. Up to the time when evidence was being taken at the Inquiry the coroner's court had not started to enquire into these deaths.

**[Editor's Note:** \* *Gussie English and Byron Wharton met their deaths while they were involved in looting.*]

## **(b) Injuries**

On the 22nd May, 1964, three people, a man, his wife and their daughter, were admitted to the Mackenzie Hospital suffering from injuries sustained as a result of a bomb being thrown into their home.

On the 24th May, 1964, two male persons were admitted to the Mackenzie Hospital. They were beaten. There was one case of shot-gun wounds. He was treated and sent away.

On the 25th May, 1964, thirty-three persons were admitted to hospital with several injuries ranging from gun shot wounds, fractures of the skull, mandible and humerus, lacerated wounds, multiple contusions and abrasions. Children suffered bruises, women suffered rape, fractures and lacerated wounds. One woman suffered a fractured right humerus and both bones of the right forearm. Another pregnant woman had multiple contusions about the body. Her baby was born the next day 26th May, 1964, a full term child. Victor Bholai Singh suffered a fractured pelvis and left fibula. He gave evidence and we noticed that he could not walk nor stand up properly. There were six cases of rape, some of whom had



been successively raped by several men. Four were hospitalised and were treated and sent the next day to Georgetown Hospital. These cases were still bleeding slightly when they were examined at Georgetown Hospital. Eighteen persons were treated by the St. Johns Ambulance Brigade.

One African had a bullet wound through his right arm. This injury was inflicted by the security forces.

The records of the persons admitted and/or treated at the Georgetown Hospital, although not as carefully documented as we would have liked, disclosed that about 14 cases were hospitalised.

One 15-year-old girl who had been raped, besides her physical suffering, had received a terrible mental shock, and there is no doubt that her experiences on the 25th May will leave an indelible scar on her memory.

On the 26th May, 1964, three persons were hospitalised for their injuries. One was treated and sent away.

On the 27th May, 1964, one Indian was beaten and an African who swam the Demerara River near the Christianburg area, because of rumour that the East Indians were coming to attack the community, was suffering from exhaustion and a punctured wound in the right arm.

On the 6th July, 1964, seven persons were injured including a child 3 years old who suffered a depressed fracture of the skull. She had to be sent to the St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital in Georgetown where after some time she recovered. Her brother, aged 10, was murdered when he tried to save her from further injuries.

In the Sun Chapman disaster 10 persons were injured. Five of these were admitted to the hospital and the other five treated and sent home. Seven other persons were treated for shock when they heard the news of the disaster.

### **(c) Loss and Damage**

Two hundred and twenty houses were destroyed. Of those, five belonged to Africans. Three of the five were destroyed either because they were owed by P.P.P. members or by persons who had assisted East Indiana during the disturbances. The other two could not have been saved when large Indian buildings adjacent to them were on fire.

Stocks, including household furniture and general merchandise, were looted, and what could not be taken away were burnt with the buildings. Only a very small proportion of looted goods has been recovered and restored to their owners. Some loot is still lying unclaimed at the Wismar Police station.

The Social Assistance Department compiled statistics relating to the displaced persons from Wismar-Mackenzie area and they were made available to the Commission. The number of families displaced is 744 comprising 1,249 adults and 2,150 children making a total of 3,399 individuals. The estimated value of the houses is \$1,457,810. The number of business premises is 87, valued at \$448,540. There were 8 farms destroyed valued at \$6,500 and livestock lost valued at \$30,000. The estimated value of the total amount of property destroyed or lost is \$1,942,850.

**The occupational groupings of the displaced families are:**

- (a) Farmers 24
- (b) Artisans 315
- (c) Businessmen 101
- (d) Clerical Employees 114
- (e) Unclassified 190

The estimated loss in earnings, wages, or salaries per month is \$135,600.

On arrival in Georgetown the evacuees were taken to the Ruimveldt bond where they were given free board and lodging for 10 days. After this period they received immediate money grants which amounted to \$16,500, and they were assisted with food vouchers monthly. Every adult was given a food voucher to the value of \$6 and \$4 for each child per month. The vouchers were not available for clothing but they were assisted in this respect by religious and

charitable organisations. Food vouchers amounted to \$18,100 per month.

**The number of families who were unemployed as a result of the disturbances are as follows:**

- (a) Farmers 19
- (b) Artisans 285
- (c) Businessmen 100
- (d) Clerical Employees 96
- (e) Unclassified 244

These people were placed either with friends or relatives so that they could try to pick up the threads of their broken lives.

The individuals who were working at Demerara Bauxite Company on the 25th May, 1964, were 365. Of this number 342 were evacuated on the 27th May, 1964, but some of those returned subsequently. During the period between 27th May, 1964 and the 6th and 7th July, 1964, 175 were employed. On the 7th July, 1964, 132 persons were evacuated. Of the total evacuees during this period 163 persons were granted leave of absence and 116 decided to terminate their employment with the Company.

Demba gave \$10,000 as financial assistance to the evacuees and the Maha Sabha expended a total of about \$30,000 to assist the displaced persons.

Many of the buildings were not insured against riot and as a result, with one exception, no one received any insurance money for buildings or stocks. In many cases the buildings were insured below the market value. One building was insured with the Hand-in-Hand Mutual Fire Insurance Company Ltd. for \$60,000. This claim was settled. The number of people insured with the Hand-in-Hand Insurance Company was 13 and the value of the buildings and stocks amounted to \$100,000. Of this amount \$6,000 was paid out. The British Guiana and Trinidad Mutual Fire Insurance Company Ltd. had buildings and stocks insured to the value of \$335,933: buildings \$253,593.00, stocks \$78,000, machinery \$600, furniture and other household items \$3,940. No amount was paid out. There were no records of claims for life insurance as a result of the disturbances.

As a result of the injuries and lootings a few criminal cases have been instituted. Some have been terminated whilst others are pending.

Many witnesses named persons who had attacked and/or robbed them. We were informed by the Police that prosecutions have been instituted against some of these persons.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

#### **I. Conclusions**

(a) We have come to the conclusion that the disturbances which took place in the Wismar-Christianburg-Mackenzie area on May 25th, 1964, were politically and racially inspired. Although there is a difference of opinion among the security officers who gave evidence before us on the point, the thorough-going destruction of East Indian property, and the fact that the security forces were in no case able to apprehend arsonists, force us to conclude that the destruction was not "spontaneous" but was organised, and well organised.

(b) We are of the opinion that the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Owen, acted injudiciously in deciding that until he had received an assessment of the situation from Mr. Neil Isaacs he would not requisition British troops for service at Wismar. In consequence, the arrival of British troops was unnecessarily delayed until most of the damage to life and property had been complete. We are convinced that he had enough information from a number of sources about the extent of the disturbances in the area at least by 10.00 a.m. on the 25th of May, to justify a requisition for the immediate dispatch of British troops. Had this been done the major portion of the tragedy might not have occurred.

(c) We consider that the Commissioner of Police acted unconstitutionally in not acceding to the request made by the Minister of Home Affairs at 2.00 p.m. on May 25th to requisition British troops for service in the Wismar area.

(d) We are satisfied that Assistant Superintendent Hobbs, the Police officer in charge of the Wismar area, did keep Police Headquarters in Georgetown fully apprised of the developing situation by way of transit messages and telephone calls. It was in fact the information obtained primarily from Mr. Hobbs which was the basis of Mr. Isaac's report to the Commissioner at 3.00 p.m. on the 25th May.

(e) We consider that the limited embodiment of only a sergeant and 24 men from "D" Company, B.G.V.F., requested by the Police on Sunday May 24, considerably reduced their effectiveness as a force complementary to the small Police force at Wismar. We agree with Major Langham, Officer Commanding "D" Company, B.G.V.F., that the full embodiment of the Volunteers at Mackenzie on Sunday May 24th, might well have reduced the scale of the Monday disturbances. Even after full embodiment was requested by Mr. Hobbs at about 8.45 a.m. on Monday 25th, authority for this was not received from Col. DeFreitas until noon. This delay meant that the majority of the Volunteer Force was immobilised during the peak of the disturbances.

(f) Although the overall conduct of the security forces was not impressive, some members of the Police and Volunteer Forces, in what was without doubt a most difficult and frustrating situation, nevertheless, managed to perform their duties conscientiously, efficiently and humanely. In our opinion, however, the strategic use of tear smoke for the dispersal of the large crowds which seemed to gather everywhere at Wismar on the 25th of May would have assisted the Police and Volunteers in containing the situation. Throughout the day of the disturbances, members of the security forces must have been continuously aware of their pathetically small numbers compared with the large population they were expected to control. It is regrettable that it had not been found possible prior to the outbreak of the disturbances - probably because of lack of funds

- to increase the numbers of Police at Wismar-Mackenzie as the Commissioner of Police had advised in his review of 1963.

(g) British troops requisitioned acted promptly and firmly with the minimum of severity against the population. Their presence in the area on the 6th and 7th July, 1964 prevented the loss of many more Indian lives.

(h) The Demerara Bauxite Company, in spite of the ever-present threat of a strike by the majority of its employees who are Africans, nevertheless gave substantial assistance to all those who suffered during these disturbances at Wismar-Mackenzie. For those employees who might care to return when conditions settle down, Demba has kept their jobs open and has paid a gratuity to some employees with a long record of service who had resigned. We feel that the company ought to find it possible to pay some sort of gratuity or severance pay in the case of every worker who has resigned because of these disturbances.

(i) The religious and charitable organisations rendered a yeoman service in the alleviation of the sufferings of the unfortunate victims of these disturbances and in their rehabilitation.

(j) Although only one of the properties which were destroyed was insured against riot, we feel that in view of the extraordinary situation, some measure of financial relief should be granted to all those whose properties were destroyed.

(k) The recent disturbances in Wismar-Christianburg-Mackenzie have been examined by your Commissioners in the context of the wider pattern of planned violence, murders, arson, bombings, reprisals and counter-reprisals that characterised life in British Guiana during 1964. Although the number of deaths caused by violence and the amount of property destroyed was greater in the rest of the Colony, Wismar does, however, bring the months of violence into sharp focus.

There, within the brief period of 48 hours, a total section of a community was attacked, outraged and subsequently had to be evacuated. Nearly all their property was maliciously destroyed,

while the majority of their erstwhile friends and neighbours either took part in the destruction or stood idly by.

## **II. Acknowledgements**

We should like to express our thanks to all those persons who assisted the Commission by giving evidence or by submitting statements or memoranda. Our thanks are due also to the staff who worked, and sometimes under trying conditions, in order that the work of the Commission should be completed. The Secretary, Mr. Beekie, spared no effort in order to assist the Commission, especially after counsel to the Commission became ill.

1. S. ROPAN SINGH - Chairman
2. HAROLD A. DRAYTON - Member
3. A.S. MACDONALD - Member
4. SAVITHRI DEVI MOOTOO - Member

*Dated this 29th January, 1965.*

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