Remarks by UNDP Country Director at Event initiating Democracy Month: Integrity of Administration, University Guest House

5th November 2010

H.E. the Vice-President of the Republic of Suriname, Mr. Robert Ameerali; Honorable Speaker of the National Assembly, Mrs. Jennifer Geerlings-Simons; Professor Leo Huberts, Keynote Speaker; Mr. Armand van der San, Ministry of Justice and Police; Dr. Hans Breeveld, Democracy Unit; Distinguished Guests; Members of the Media; Ladies and Gentlemen.

Please permit me from the outset to say on behalf of UNDP Suriname, how pleased we are to be partnering with the Democracy Unit, Anton de Kom University, in supporting this year’s activities during Democracy Month November 2010. UNDP is well-known as an organization that works predominantly with national governments. However, what is less well known is that we also partner with Academia, NGOs and Private Sector groups. I am therefore honored to have been requested by the Democracy Unit to deliver some remarks during today’s activity. I am even more honored to be able to do so in the presence of the Vice-President of the Republic of Suriname, the Speaker of the National Assembly, and other distinguished guests.

The theme of this year’s Democracy Month is ‘Integrity of Administration’. This is well-chosen as Suriname enters into another phase of your development process under a new government chosen at the recent elections of May 2010. A new government invariably brings new promise, new directions, new policies and renewed energy to tackle the pressing problems that confront society and those at the helm of the governmental machinery. Suriname is no different. The Speech by His Excellency the President in the National Assembly on October 1st 2010, in sweeping terms outlined the elements of the government’s policy framework for the next five years and more. Public sector modernization and fighting corruption were high on the list of priority actions. And so it is fitting that the theme for this year’s Democracy Month should focus on integrity of administration, since corruption is the single most critical ‘corrosive’ that undermines such integrity.

Mr. Vice-President, Madame Speaker, Ladies and Gentlemen, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan described corruption as “an insidious plague that has a wide range of corrosive effects on societies. It undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to violations of human rights, distorts markets, erodes the quality of life and allows organized crime, terrorism and other threats to human security to flourish”. Numerous studies have demonstrated that corruption erodes the rule of law, weakens the performance of governments and public institutions, destroys public trust in governance institutions, diminishes the practice of democracy, and is the enemy of good governance. Corruption impacts the poor disproportionately, since this group does not have the means to pay for services which they should be receiving at no cost. The United Nations has designated the 9th December each year as International Anti-Corruption Day. The theme chosen for 2009 was: “Don’t let corruption kill development”. A corrupt society and corrupt institutions can hinder access of the poor to education, health and other public services, access to justice and the protection of the law; and can lead to social instability and reduce citizen security.
A recent UNDP publication comments as follows on the impact of corruption on human development:

“High levels of corruption can lower the level of human development by reducing economic growth, increasing poverty and inequality, raising the costs and reducing the quality of service such as health and education. Corruption is likely to lead to further human rights violations and disproportionately affect socially vulnerable and marginalized groups including women. Corruption is likely to worsen environmental governance by reducing the stringency of environmental regulations, and hence impedes sustainable development by threatening environmental sustainability.” Expressed in different terms, corruptions diminishes a country’s ability to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed at the UN General Assembly in September 2001. Without exception all eight of the MDGs are negatively affected by corruption in its many manifestations.

The same UNDP publication quoted above provides the following examples of how corruption negatively affects development:

- More than 70% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in transition economies perceive corruption as an impediment to their business.
- US$148 billion is plundered from Africa every year because of corruption. This figure is thought to represent 25 percent of Africa’s GDP.
- Corruption can raise by up to 20 per cent the cost of producing goods.
- Corruption creates uncertainty in the market through discretion and continuous change of rules.
- Corruption undercuts government capacity to collect revenue.
- Corruption reduces government capacity to deliver social services.
- Corruption increases costs of bureaucracy through wasted time in negotiating contracts.
- Corruption leads to lowering of standards as sub-standard goods/services are provided and inappropriate technology is acquired (manufacturing, drugs, construction, etc).
- Corruption undermines human rights, rule of law and may play a key role in fomenting and prolonging conflicts, leading to an unstable and failed state.

Mr. Vice-President, Madame Speaker, Ladies and Gentlemen, research, experience and sometimes very personal experience have amply demonstrated the insidious impacts of corruption on states and societies. Corrupt practices can rob the state of much needed revenues to pursue development and social welfare policies for example when corrupt public officials and business persons collude to avoid paying duties and taxes. Corrupt practices can rob the state of much needed talent and skilled human resources when ill-qualified but well-connected persons are recruited for public sector positions through nepotism, cronyism, patron-client relationships and family ties. Corrupt practices can lead to poor or sub-standard development outcomes when persons are awarded contracts for which they have limited or no expertise, not on the basis of open competition and quality of work, but rather through bribes to public officials or ‘old boys’ networks. Corrupt practices can lead to poor social outcomes when public officials do not perform the tasks for which they are being paid: e.g. when teachers do not teach children in schools; when nurses do not provide care for the sick and needy; when doctors do not provide medical care to those in need of attention; when law enforcement officials do not provide service and protection to those they swore to serve; when the judicial establishment does not dispense justice with an even hand and according to the law; and what is worse when all of the above extract illegal and additional payments for doing what they are already being paid to do.
Mr Vice-President, Madame Speaker, Ladies and Gentlemen, the above are all examples of acts of corruption through commission or omission, large and small. Individually and collectively they make the difference between a stable, progressive, caring and well ordered society; or one that is mired in controversy, immorality, selfishness and decadence.

The UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) was signed in 2005. I’m advised that whereas Suriname has signed the Convention it has not yet been ratified. Notwithstanding, the objectives of the UNCAC are in line with the policy declarations made by Suriname. The objectives of the UNCAC are 1. To prevent and combat corruption more efficiently and effectively; 2. To support international cooperation & technical assistance including asset recovery; and 3. To promote integrity, accountability and proper management of public affairs and property. Suriname is a signatory and has acceded to the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption, and I am aware is making strong effort to abide by the articles of that instrument including Suriname’s reporting obligations. I am also advised that renewed consideration is being given to the Anti-Corruption Bill introduced into the National Assembly some time ago, and there is strong expectation that a bill will be sent to the National Assembly in the not too distant future for debate, approval, and ultimately assent by His Excellency the President of the Republic.

These are all positive steps taken by the Government of the Republic of Suriname. Clearly, there is much left to be done and I am assured that increasingly focused measures will be taken over time to address corruption in all of its manifestations.

In this regard, I am pleased to remind that UNDP Suriname already has an engagement with the Ministry of Justice and Police under a project on anti-corruption. Under this project, UNDP is committed to assist the Government and people of Suriname to address corruption through the provision of technical support for the training of key anti-corruption officials; the development of awareness strategies for Parliamentarians, Government Officials and the general public; and support for ratifying and operationalizing the UNCAC. We supported a workshop for the media on anti-corruption earlier this year; and will be considering renewed actions in 2011 and beyond, in the coming week at a meeting of the Project Board comprising a number of Government Ministers whose portfolios support anti-corruption initiatives. This Project Board is chaired by the Honorable Minister of Justice and Police.

Mr. Vice-President, Madame Speaker, Ladies and Gentlemen, in closing please permit me to again thank the Democracy Unit for providing me this opportunity to address you this morning on this most important topic; to assure the Government and People of Suriname of UNDP’s unstinting commitment to supporting Suriname in ways you deem appropriate in your efforts to address corruption and the challenges to integrity in administration; and to thank the Vice-President and the Speaker of the National Assembly for gracing us with your presence this morning.

I thank you for your attention.

Thomas W. Gittens