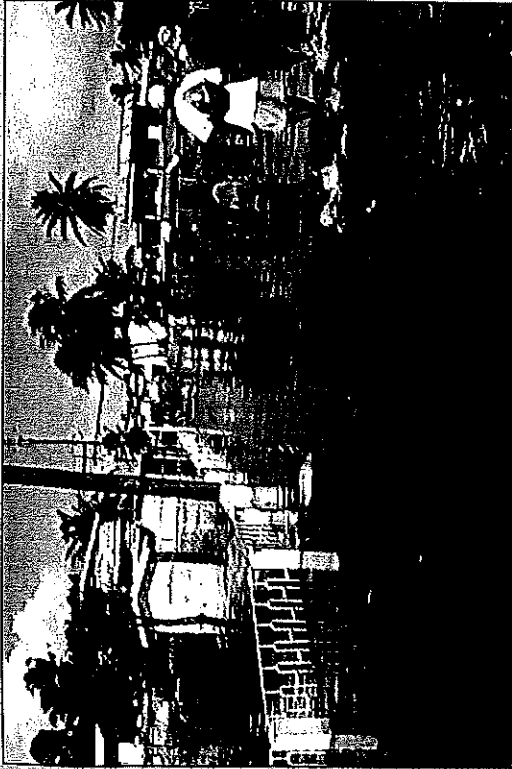




Crossroads Women's Centre, Princes & Adelaide Sts., Charleston,
Georgetown



ORGANISING FOR SURVIVAL: GRASSROOTS WOMEN OF THE FLOOD

Demands and video transcript

CONTENTS

Demands from the women of the flood	3
Transcript from video	12
Photos: working groups discussing demands, Road or lake	10, 11
About Red Thread	19

These demands are addressed to our Government, opposition parties, RDCs, NDCs, the private sector (businesses and banks), religious groups, trade unions, non-government organizations (NGOs), women's groups and to funders.

At a meeting on March 9, 2005 organized by the Woman's Affairs Bureau and women's groups to mark International Women's Week 2005, Minister Bibi Shadick, Minister in the Ministry of Labour, Human Services and Social Security said "It is the women of Guyana who defended their children from disease and death during the flood."

We are the women whose work Minister Shadick recognized - the mainly grassroots women of every race who braved waist-deep and even chest-deep flood waters filled with disease and death to find new ways to feed, clothe, shelter, teach, nurse, and worry about our children - above all, to keep them safe. To do this, we had to work even harder than we always work and in more dangerous conditions.

We live in Lodge, Vigilance squatting area, Paradise, Mon Repos pasture, Martyrsville, Strathspey, Buxton, Better Hope, Betervwaging, Industry, Friendship, ECD, Friendship EBD, Lusignan, Good Hope Phase 1, Good Hope Phase 2, Sophia, Charlestown, St Cuthberts, West Ruimveldt, Annandale, East La Penitence, and Plaisance.

Since the flood, many of us have also been working with women in Albouystown, Foulis, Bladen Hall, LBI, and Haslington who suffered just like us and worked just like us when the



Photo by the Red Thread

floods came to their communities.

We are from all the races in Guyana and from all political parties, some of us from no political party; the flood did not discriminate among us. This is not about party politics but women and survival politics. Anyone who tries to break us up is against women and our families surviving.

We are not claiming to represent all the women in our communities yet, but we will work to bring together all the women in each of our communities, working with men in the communities who respect us and what we are trying to do.

- We are mothers, grandmothers, aunts, daughters and sisters who care for our families full-time without any wage, or who care for our families and also work outside the home for low wages.
- We are women with disabilities and women looking after children with disabilities.
- We are cane farmers who lost our crops and who are unable to replant and unable to pay leases for farmland.
- We are garment workers, security guards, domestics, newspaper vendors and other women with jobs outside the home who were not able to earn even our usually low wages during the flood.
- We are market vendors, fish vendors and vendors of snacks and other goods who lost our stocks to the flood and who cannot restock because we have no money and no one is willing to trust us money.
- We are farmers, vendors and other small business-women who owe installments on loan repayments for

investments lost in the flood.

- We are housewives and caregivers who suffered massive losses of household possessions, kitchen gardens, poultry and small livestock.

We are not asking anyone for handouts; but we do want what we are entitled to – the actions we need government, the opposition parties, the RDCs, the NDCs, the Georgetown Mayor and City Council, the private sector (businesses and banks), the non-government organizations (NGOs) and all the other sectors to take so we can continue to ensure the survival of our children, families and communities without the impossible burden we have been carrying since the flood started. This is what we want:

1. We want assurances from government agencies, opposition parties, NGOs, religious groups and any other groups which raised donations for our "relief" that the money and materials they have in hand in our name will be put urgently towards:

- continued relief to all of us who need it. If we can't earn, how can we buy food to eat, mattresses to sleep on and materials to clean with?
- restoring and improving our means of subsistence and means of livelihood.

We are willing to meet with others **URGENTLY** to work out which is the best system for replacing what we lost – money, vouchers or "in kind", for example, seeds. We cannot decide what we think is best until we know all the possibilities and understand how each one would work.

2. We want the distribution to be fair. During the flood we experienced different kinds of discrimination – against those of us with disabilities, against those of us living in some communities or parts of the same community, or against those of us who didn't belong to some organizations who were distributing.

Even some religious groups did that!

3. We want our debts for goods and equipment damaged and destroyed in the flood cancelled, especially the debts to hire-purchase firms, IPED and banks. We also need arrangements to be made to cancel what we owe GPL, GWI and GTT, because we cannot pay. It is not right to expect us to pay off for goods or equipment that we cannot use through no fault of our own.

We know that President Jagdeo has said he is having discussions on this matter but we need these discussions to be finalized urgently.

4. We want more than just the same level of poverty that our families and communities had before the flood. Some of us were barely surviving. All of us need access to clean water, electricity, phones, healthcare, and transport we can afford, roads, enough income. We need cheaper housing that we can afford without going into debt (when the flood started, some of us who couldn't earn any money still had to find up to \$2000 a week to throw box hand to pay for the house lot or building materials).

5. We want cancellation of every part of what people call the national debt. We support the President's call for debt forgiveness (meaning cancellation), but why did he only mention Trinidad and Tobago?

6... We want a full written audit and public explaining of any donations that government agencies, opposition parties, religious groups and NGOs received for our relief, how they were used, how the money was divided between the relief we actually received and what people were paid to distribute the relief, what they still have in hand and how they intend to use what they have in hand.

Once again, we recognize the President's promise to give a full account of donations the Government has received and used so far for the relief of our families and communities, and we urge the Government to provide this account speedily.

7. We want urgent clean up action!

One - we believe that the soil is carrying disease - we see our plants, grass, trees, livestock, poultry and even dogs still getting sick and dying. We have heard that we shouldn't plant or graze our livestock. We want the soil tested. We need to know NOW what is the condition of the soil, if it needs to be cleaned up, when it will be cleaned up and how, when we will be able to plant our crops, and what arrangements will be made for us to feed our children until then?

Two - we want action on cleaning up the worms, flies and mosquitoes that are infesting our yards and communities.

Three - we want immediate action to completely clean up the schools.

In relation to clean-up work in our communities, we have heard about the work of our sister and brother villagers on the ECD and we support it. We are willing to work to clean up, but in some places we don't have water. Many of our communities don't have any cleaning supplies or sometimes enough cleaning supplies.

We believe that if anyone is being paid to do cleanup work, that money should come to those who have been left in more suffering by the flood.

8. We want the Ministry of Education to have urgent discussions with parents, teachers, PTAs and the teachers union on

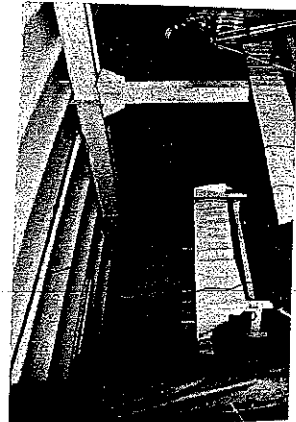


what arrangements will be made for the children doing SSEE and CXC exams to "catch up" and urgent action to replace books and uniforms our children have lost. We want a system for helping the children get over the trauma they suffered.

9. We want an urgent investigation into EXACTLY why the flood happened.

One thing all of us learned during the flood is that all of us (not just people at the top or engineers, etc) need to know exactly what made the flood happen so that all of us can make sure that all of those responsible take the necessary action - whether it is cleaning the drains, keeping the place clean, getting rid of the garbage, putting in drainage pumps, or fixing the conservancy dam. If not, we will continue to be afraid every time rain falls. Our children are in a panic. We need everything in order before the May/June rains. We need to know whose neglect allowed the flood, if there was mismanagement, who was responsible, if there was corruption, who was responsible. And those people, especially those at a high level, should be punished and their misdeeds corrected. We have already been punished by their misdeeds.

10. We have proposals for how to prepare for future disasters, including some system of disaster insurance for poor people. We believe that our communities must be able to make sure that what has to be done is done. We want to be part of discussions about the future. We



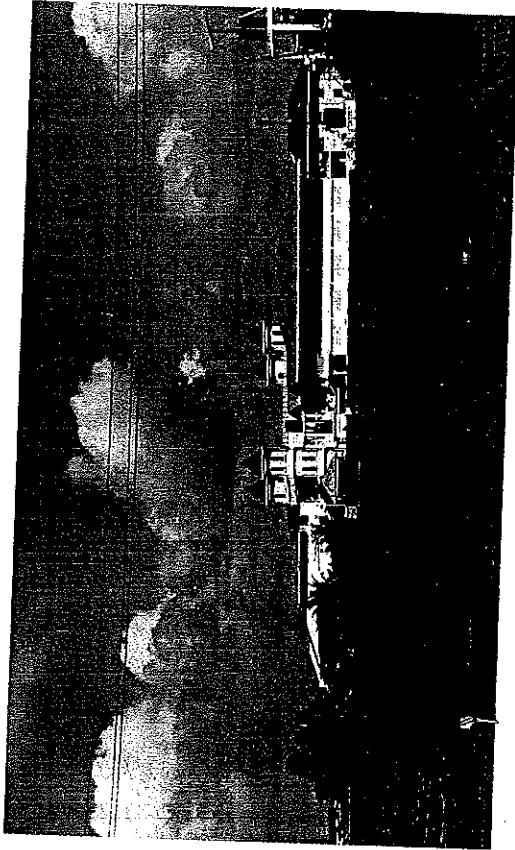
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munities by our caring work, and who therefore ensure that Guyana survives.

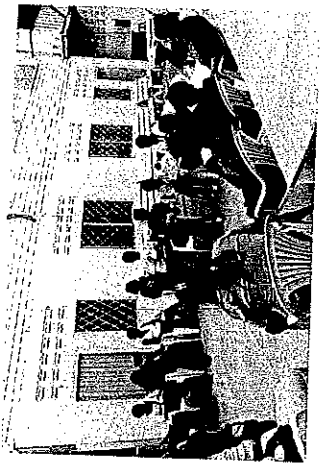
These demands were drafted by Red Thread from statements made by women during the many meetings held in the various communities and in Georgetown before the speak out. The draft was then discussed and agreed at a meeting of community representatives and Red Thread representatives on March 11, and then discussed and amended in working groups and all together at the speak out on March 13.



9



11



10

Transcript for video tape

On the Night of Friday, January 15th 2005, at around 10.30pm, rain started to fall. It fell all through the night until the next morning. By morning, our roads and yards were flooded. Everyone was wondering what was happening. Some of us jokingly said that we were experiencing a little Tsunami. But as the water continued to rise, we began to panic.

The water was raising so fast that in no time it was waist deep and breast deep in our homes, yards and on the roads. There was no way one could tell roads from drains in the villages only on the public road wasn't covered. There was water everywhere. Tombs were covered, pit latrines were overflowing, garbage was floating everywhere - plastic bottles, styrofoam boxes, plastic bags, empty tins - garbage was floating EVERYWHERE.

As the flood waters rose people were constructing boats, charging a fee to anyone charging a fee to anyone who wanted to travel, whether to go to the doctor or in search of food! We had to use these boats to go where we usually walked. Boats made out of hollowed out old fridges and freezers, rafts made out of empty 5 gallon bottles and plastic barrels with strips of wood..

What caused the flood? An unusual amount of rain fell, yes, but the flooding was manmade. Government at all levels did nothing to safeguard us against the effects of changes in weather patterns as a result of global warming. Our drainage system could not deal with the rain-fall. On the East Coast of Demerara, the worst hit area, the flooding was caused partly by serious overtopping and seepage in the main conservancy dam - a dam which is about 226 square miles. Some flooding was caused when water was deliberately released from this dam to ease pressure and lessen the likelihood of breaches. There was also overtopping and seepage in smaller conservancy dams. Poor maintenance. The system was also weakened by blockages of drains, canals and Kokers that were not working.

"...Tings in me house done. Me en got nothing. In the name of Jesus, I don't have nothing left. Even to me wardrobe -- half me wardrobe had water. Every single thing just duck out. Watch you can see the

water, how far e raise in the house? Till here -- till here see? Everything under water. See how we suffer at the back here? Water raise till here on the door, all them clothes this wet me even frighten to hold it because if snake inside (nervous laugh) because all the chair got to throw away. Me wardrobe en got drawer, the drawer sail out an gone till at the back by the canal where the pump a wuk till there it deh. I en got clothes, nothing fo wear. Right now we suffering to the highest at the maximum -- I en know how high fo tell you. Me whole garden duck and outs. Coconut tree, there is nothing left. If you think is lie you could-- you can't even reach at the back here. Me black tank near fo cover -- two bars left at the top so fo water reach inside it, at the back here. So you could imagine what we go through with this water -- me ducks dem had to eat on top of the house. Da is how we life turn. All me years me work. Me married fuh 27 years. This guh make 28 years, mother of three children and three grandchildren (tearful) and look what I going through. Everything that I work for in all me life-span gone down the drain in just a wink of a second. 56 duck imagine? 56. Four left 4. They catching cramp -- up to the other day one catch cramp -- 2 yesterday morning throw away; all a dead one after the other. That is what left..."

SUBTITLED: *Right now me husband dead...*

What RT did

We decided that we had to do something to help. We decided to focus on elderly people, pregnant and breast-feeding mothers, people with disabilities and women with young children (5yrs old and under).

So we then decided to work in partnership with Alicea Foundation (a small group of mainly women who do not take funds from agencies and are completely accountable) and the Guyana Citizens Initiative (a network, including Red Thread, set up to coordinate flood relief by those of us who are not in government) to extend our work to other communities. With resources raised by them and/or in collaboration with them, we carried out the following tasks:

We organised nurses from Beacon Foundation and two doctors to run medical clinics for two days at three shelters in Mahaica East Coast

Demerara.

We assisted in the packaging of hampers at Rahaman's Enterprise and Alicea Foundation. We also distributed food, cleaning supplies and baby hampers from Alicea Foundation, the World Food Programme, Guyana Citizens Initiative and Guy Aid (USA), in sections of 10 communities on the East Coast, 4 communities in GT and 2 communities on the East Bank.

The flood lasted for as much as seven weeks in some communities and affected about 275,000 women, children and men or about 37% of the total population. The total area affected was about 1400 square kilometres. While the flood waters remained on the land some of us were unable to leave our houses, others moved to relatives in and outside of Georgetown, others moved to shelters. Some of us moved our livestock and poultry into our homes in an effort to save them, while others were not able to save anything. We suffered terrible losses. Our livestock died, our feed washed away, our farms and kitchen gardens, sewing machines, tools, household items (furniture, utensils, clothes even the children's school clothes and text books etc) were all destroyed. During this time some people were injured in the flood waters while others lost their lives.

"... I myself, if I didn't careful I did drown in my yard. When I go down to my fowl pen the water deh till here..."

"... I don't know, I can't imagine half night rain - because the rain start falling Sunday night about 1.30 or like I o'clock, and by time the place bright the roads and the street cover and which I never see and everybody say they never see something like this..."

"... Only digging the trenches dem, digging the trenches dem, send the food more further. They are educated people and they worse than we. So long the natural drainage there - they say the koker has been calmonised??..."

"... When I check on my cows I lose 2 of my cows. I lose my ducks and my fowls, my meat birds, everything. I just lose them. When I wake up after I found that water was under ma bed I just had to pick up my granddaughter and I come out the house...."

"... Well when I come out my house right and we enter into the yard, the water was about leg height you know and the water like it just pulling. But the dam is lower than the yard, so when you meet on the dam of itself the water was like waist (high), so I was frighten, but it have fence there so I hold on, I hold on, until we meet so we could get the fridge boat was to go in. But when I get more scared is when I fell out this fridge with my three children. Is then I get more scared with this water cause I think this water just keep raising. I was very, very scared. ..."

"... My 16 year old is writing CXC. He has not gone back to school because no school is there. The schools aren't fumigated yet on the East Coast, and our children are home, and it's just... everything is just the same way, and the place is dry a little, rain keep falling: every minute a puddle keep coming of water and is the same situation to me and I am really, really, really frustrated over this whole water situation and no school and... it's... I don't know ..."

"... I went in my toilet at one time and while I was sitting high a snake was walking on the floor of the toilet."

"... Ah go home I see the water come up at my veranda door - how the water. The water was 5 feet bout 6 inches because is 9 blocks I get and it pass 5 blocks and a half. And I studying I say wha going on this water still coming in...."

"...I have a flat concrete building when the rain started and I saw the kitchen (the kitchen is lower than the other parts of the house) After I saw the kitchen was flooded and then the water started to rise I said lord what is . However I had to remove from the home, myself and children. I was so traumatized that one day I was emotional because by the second day we found like three snakes in the house right, while we were trying to pack things together...

"...I wouldn't be able to explain myself how I feel because in my whole life I never witness something like this - walking in so much water, surrounded by this water, Something like a strange dream and I don't wish to see that dream again....

"... You know sometimes you're on the road you may have a bright outlook, persons tell themselves well, everything is okay but you know sometimes you only have one or two underwear to go with just because you want the necessities of life....

"...I build some cupboards for my kitchen they are swollen... I don't know..., my house is total confusion my chairs they have like a ... [fungus] ... [tearful] mildew... my wardrobe I don't know what to say, I don't know where to start from . Yes the hampers that we were given it's a good gesture that the government has provided but I still think that they should have done something more. I have really really lost a lot, a lot"

Although the Government was distributing food hampers. The manner of distribution discriminated against all but the most able-bodied: often, main public roads which were relatively high. Women, children and men would be forced to wade through infested, stink water to collect "relief". At worst, they had to scramble for it.

There was no visible prioritising of pregnant women, breastfeeding

mothers, elderly people or disabled people.

In the process of distributing hampers to some communities the news spread, and women as well as men came into RT centre seeking assistance in the line of food hampers. We didn't want to turn RT centre into a distribution centre and in any case, our main objective was to organise with the women. Women were in the forefront of organising the survival of their families in all the communities.

We began to hold meetings with women in their communities and at the Red Thread centre. [These centres are: Good Hope Phase 1 & 2, Buxton, Better Hope, Foulis, Annandale North, Annandale Side Line Dam & embankment, Haslington, Melanie North, Mon Repos North, Martyrs' Ville, Cummings Lodge, BV Railway Embankment, Vigilance North and South, Bladen Hall, Friendship and Lusignan (all ECD), Sophia (GT), and Friendship EBD)]. During these meetings we provided information about how to treat the water for bathing and drinking and how to clean their homes after the flood water receded - but most important in terms of the women taking charge of getting their lives back, we assisted them to tabulate and value their losses. The next step was for us to organise to work out our collective demands and make them heard.

The meetings in the centre and in the communities formulated some demands which were taken to a women's speak out of over 250 women on March 13. The women were able to put their cases directly to the members of Parliament, donor agencies, women's groups, the trade union movement, government-related agencies, RDC's (Regional Democratic Councils) NGO's, and the media who were invited to the speak out.

"...During the flood I had some goods which finish. After it has finish I come out on the road, to get assistance as what I could get for the two children them. Something we walk in so much water to get the food. When we come out on the road they dash the thing on you - from you head to you toe - if flour or milk powder or something. We still had to collect it and come home...."

" ...I take a boat for \$500 bring my family dem out on the line top. Ah walk them from the line top at Good Hope and bring them fill in to Triumph. Track them through pan me back and carry them at me family house just fo rescue at the upstairs

"Disabled people like me in chair didn't counted in Guyana. We are punishing sets of people and disable goes for everybody in Guyana because you can be disabled in many ways. It is hard pon us



" ... We need something to start. The shop wash out...

" ...I went in Cayman Island to build what I have. And don't tell me I have to go back there to get what I want. That's not my country. This is my country.

Here I want to build my future and what I lost, I want it back here. I want it immediately. ... " [speak on sister, speak]

What did our flood organizing win?

The UN Resident Representative met with a delegation of women [on April 5th 05] and subsequently the United Nations Development Programme provided chickens, seeds and equipment (sewing machines and sewing machine cabinets, and freezers) to some women in Good Hope and Buxton to restore their livelihoods.

We got the vets from the Ministry of Agriculture to treat the animals that were sick and dying

Medical attention for a woman who got injured in the flood

Proper cleaning up of the schools and getting the Minister of Education to make a public statement about what was used to clean the schools.

One week after we published our demands, the Govt. announced that \$10,000.00 would be paid to each affected household.

The organizing got Indo Guyanese women from different parts of the East Coast and Afro Guyanese women especially from Buxton in the same room to interact in a meaningful way and to organise together in their own interest.

... women and children exploited and simultaneously work to change those relations

Objectives

for women's unwaged and low-waged caring and properly remunerated and for equal pay

against all forms of violence, especially against beginning with domestic violence and violence against political conflict, and to support victims of

solidarity among women across divides and discrimination including discrimination on the basis of class/disability, age, sexual identity and HIV status

possible to provide individual women and the information skills and other support to