

A moment with the President

28th November 2010

Marceline Evenor (ME):

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and welcome to our programme, '*A moment with the President*'.

Today we will discuss the Defences Forces, SPDF. 25th November is Defences Forces Day and the President, who is also the Commander in Chief of the Defence Forces made a speech for the occasion in which he spoke about the role of the Defences Forces and he also made some announcements.

In tonight's programme, President Michel will elaborate further on the points he made in that speech.

Mr. President, in the speech you made on 25th November, you talked about a new vision for the Seychelles People's Defences Forces; a vision aiming towards a more professional force, that is more modern and more efficient. Can you please talk a little about this? How do you plan to implement this vision ?

President Michel : There are two principal elements to developing a military force that is professional and efficient. The first is the development of its human resources. It is important to have men and women who are patriots, who are prepared to defend their country and at the same time who want to develop a career in the military. This will after all help them to develop their personalities, and be useful for their personal development. To succeed in doing this, there must be the right conditions so that these men and women may develop a sense of belonging within the forces; they must have the means to personal development and the will to participate in the implementation of this vision for a more professional and efficient force.

Secondly, you must have the necessary equipment; people alone cannot make that professional force that will discharge its responsibilities efficiently as per our Constitution. Precisely, right now we are facing the challenges of piracy, and we are getting international aid in the form of new equipment that will help our men and women in the forces to develop their capacity.

Another important form of assistance we are receiving from friendly countries and international organizations is in the form of training. This is not only local training but also specialized training abroad that will allow people in our forces to use the equipment we have received and to develop

new military tactics. In addition to that, we have taken several measures that will help prime our forces and raise their competence level and thus allow them to perform better. I'm talking specifically about the setting up of TAZAR Special Forces, which we will find today is a necessity in the fight against piracy. This force is trained to fight against any form of terrorism, should the need arise. The world is faced with many challenges today. The changes we are implementing will help us to create a modern force that can effectively deal with any situation and also help us to achieve the ultimate objective of defending our sovereignty and the national integrity of our motherland.

ME : Mr. President, you also announced a new scheme of service, and new pension and housing scheme for the Defence Forces. We are still however, in the middle of an economic reform. How are you going to manage these new schemes?

P : First of all, the scheme of service we have announced and which is to be implemented from the 1st of January is not the first one in the SPDF. Naturally, with new developments and new economic realities, we have to make the schemes that have existed before more realistic and more attractive so that more men and women will be interested to join the military forces. Neither is this particular scheme of service unique to this country. We have recently introduced a new wage grid across the board in the public service that is uniform and which applies to different sectors. Teachers have their scheme of service, the Police force have their which we are also thinking of amending next year. Health workers also have their own scheme of service.

Thus, it is normal for the military to have their own scheme of service too, and now that our economy is showing signs of improving, we will be able to implement this scheme and those who join will have an attractive package that will allow them to live in comfort with their families. They will be better able to concentrate on their jobs; for example, those who have to work out at sea will be at rest, knowing that their families are comfortable, back home. This move to improve the conditions of our soldiers is part of the changes we are making; changes that will allow them to have proper housing with less difficulty, if you like, through a more direct route.

There are other changes that we are going to introduce; yes, it will cost money, but I stress that we are a responsible Government, precisely in terms of the economic reform we are implementing. Everything we undertake is done in a sustainable way. If today we are reviewing the scheme of service for certain cadres, it is because we know we can afford it.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people of Seychelles once again for the support they gave us when we launched our reform two years ago. I went to all the districts to explain to the people, why it was necessary to have this reform. It was the way to establish a solid base for our

economy to develop, a solid foundation on which to build a modern economy; and I asked everybody to join with me and work together in order to surmount this crisis that was affecting the whole world. A majority of the people came forward and were ready to support me, and together, we have done it. It was our reform. I asked the Opposition as well to join me and participate in the effort to combat this crisis, but they refused. It was their choice of course, to refuse, but I think they had some motive or other; perhaps they thought that this reform would not succeed. In spite of this, the majority of the people rallied behind me and today we are seeing our sacrifices bear fruit. Bit by bit, we will be able to implement more programmes that will benefit the Seychellois people and they will be able to improve their living conditions.

ME : Mr. President, over the years there have been many criticisms with regards to the need for the defence forces, its *raison d'être*. The general criticism is that the forces' salaries are not justified since they don't really have anything to do. What is your comment to that?

P : I think that the *raison d'être* for the defences forces is evident for all to see today. If I may trace its history a little, the first time we saw its *raison d'être* was on 25th November, 1981 and they defended our country against a mercenary attack. I know that there were exiled Seychellois behind this attempt; but is it justified that a foreign force should come into our country and attack our people? It is an aggression. And our military forces repulsed this aggression, showing how necessary it is to have our own defence forces. They are there to defend our country and our people. Their presence has guaranteed peace and stability in our country. We musn't forget that a military force does not need to fight all the time to justify its existence. The fact that it exists is in itself a deterrent to those who would attack us.

When our fishing boats are attacked by pirates, when pirates try to take our people hostage ; and we must consider the possibility that they could even try to land on our islands and attack our tourism establishments – the fact that we have our military forces, our Coast Guards is in itself a protection. This justifies the existence of our Defence Forces. I don't think there is any intelligent Seychellois who can reason today who won't say, 'thank God we have our defence forces!' This protection allows us to continue our development without interruption.

ME : I don't want to pursue the debate on this subject, Mr. President, but there are people who might say, fine, we see what the Coast Guards are doing, but what about the other units? What are they doing? Do you think perhaps we should see more of them in the communities so as to develop this bond between the defence forces and the community? There was a certain period when we saw

the defence forces doing a lot of community work. Foreign military forces who come into port always get involved in community work anyway; so what do you think about this?

P : I would like to make just two comments about this. In the first place, when you have a defence force, you can't expect to see the defence aspect of their job all the time. Today, the danger we face is at sea and we see our CoastGuards going out to sea to deal with it. Let us not forget though that there are other things going at bases on land that supports what is going on at sea. For example, we have our communications systems, our radar systems, which naturally are based on land. We also have to conduct surveillance by air, and even more important, we have to protect our airport as it is the only quick access we have to the rest of the world where air traffic is concerned. It is important that we have a contingent at the airport at all times to protect it and all the different airlines that have their planes coming here. We need more than the CoastGuards for all this. We have created a Special Force, an elite force which is a land force but which is at the same time specialized in different defence techniques. If for example we have a hostage situation, we must have people who are trained to deal with it. So we cannot rely only on the coastguards; we must have other forces as support and back up.

Secondly, perhaps SBC is not aware of it, but our soldiers do a lot of community work. In the past, we know that we are the ones who have built most of the airstrips on our outer islands. They have built a lot of social housing as well, not only for soldiers but also for the general public. Recently, with the new challenges we are facing, the military forces have been more involved with their training, with readying themselves in the eventuality that they have to defend us. They haven't stopped doing community work however; sometimes they help to paint schools, they are involved in cleaning up activities, in the playground and other places... So, they are there with the community but not necessarily publicizing it.

Let us understand one thing; if there is a foreign ship in port, for example, a French ship or an American one, there is nothing wrong with their doing some benevolent work combined with their shore-leave, let's say they go to an orphanage and do some painting jobs, or cleaning... They are enjoying their shore-leave but at the same time they do these activities because they want to show their goodwill towards the community.

It could be the same in our case if one of our ships went, let's say, to Madagascar; once there, they could do some community work at an orphanage, a school, as gesture goodwill towards the community. It depends on the circumstances. However, the fact remains that troops are more

focused on their training or patrolling wherever they are, and since our economic zone has been stretched, it is not easy to cover every area and still have time to do other community work.

ME : Mr. President, you have told us a bit more about the different tasks of the defence forces, some of which we were perhaps, aware of. Are we also asked, sometimes, to participate in foreign forces like the African Union, for example?

P : As you know, Seychelles is a small country with a population of only about 87,000 inhabitants. Now that our transformation is going at such a formidable pace and our human resource is so limited, we cannot have a very big force, nor will our financial resources allow us a big one. What we need is an efficient and effective force. Our defence forces are not meant for aggression but for our defence, our protection.

Thus we train only a certain number that we consider is sufficient for our needs. I don't see how it would be possible to send any contingents abroad, let's say for example to the African Union Peace Corps. It is not possible for us to do that, so we focus on training our troops for our own protection. It doesn't mean though, that we cannot participate in observation missions; for example we went to the Comoros not very long ago when there was trouble there. We also have some officers attached to Eastbrigg, Nairobi, which is a regional organization, and other officers have been sent on attachment to an American force in Djibouti. So we do participate in certain activities that do not require large numbers of soldiers to be dispatched, but it is more to do with gaining experience and competencies for our soldiers whenever we have the chance.

ME : Mr. President, at the beginning of this interview you spoke about increasing the facilities available for the defence forces and their training. You have mentioned the new base given to us by the UAE. This includes radars, boats, helicopters and planes. As Commander-in-Chief, how do you plan to ensure that we have enough qualified Seychellois nationals to man this base?

P: We are always training young recruits so that they can cope with any new equipment that we acquire. Many of our military personnel go abroad from time to time to train in the use of the different equipment we have. For example, the personnel working on our patrol boats today are all Seychellois. The captain, the engineer are all Seychellois. Sometimes though, we do need foreign expertise in technical fields, so we might have an advisor while our own people are still in training. I think that this is a continuous process, which is why the new scheme of service proposed and the new working conditions for our Defence Forces will encourage more young people to join ; They can benefit from all the specialized training available and on all the equipment.

In the case of more specialized equipment, we have foreign technicians coming for six months or more to train our people. Because many of this equipment is high technology, we need young people with good academic abilities so that they are better able to deal with the new technology.

ME : What is your comment to certain speculations people have been making about the new base, to the effect that it is not really intended for the Seychellois people but rather for the Sheik Khalifa's protection and that there will be foreign soldiers based there permanently?

P : I repeat what I have already said before; there are certain people, especially people in the opposition, who are not happy to see our country moving ahead, to see us getting assistance for the protection of our country. Things are going so well, and that makes them unhappy because they know that the better things get for us, the less chance they have of ever coming into power in this country. So they spread a lot of propaganda.

Everybody knows that when someone makes a grant to you in terms of infrastructure, it belongs to you and nobody else. Thus, the UAE has decided to grant our Defence Forces this base out of their generosity, comprising of five boats, of which the two largest will be able to reach the Amirantes under their own steam and come back, and the smaller ones will be used to guard our coastal areas. The UAE has done this because they want to help Seychelles. It is the same thing with India; they have given us a boat, and that doesn't mean that they want to station troops in Seychelles.

Let us not forget that piracy is not solely our problem, but rather a regional problem and an international problem. Those countries in the region that have the means, and this includes India and the UAE, feel that it is their responsibility to help in the fight against the piracy threat. The European Union is also helping through air patrols and maritime patrols as well. All these are concerted efforts by friendly powers to help us face this challenge. They do it because they love us and not because they want to station troops here. To answer your question, I think that these are just rumours put about by the opposition to fool our people.

M.E : On the question of piracy, we have seen the CoastGuards make rescue operations twice, to save our fishermen from pirates. They were able to do that even though the fishermen had already been taken hostage; but in the case of cargo ships, we have heard too often that though they are bigger, the pirates' smaller boats circle around them and board them without any military resistance. Why don't the foreign military vessels around not do anything ? Why does the Seychelles Defences Forces dare to enter into military engagement with the pirates and actually save our fishermen when other vessels which are bigger don't?

P : Each country has its own 'Rules of Engagement' where combat is concerned. The European Union has its own as does NATO, and this concerns the laws of their countries. We also have our own rules of engagement which tell us in which situation our troops can take action. Again, it depends on what is permissible in the laws of your country.

It is for this reason that recently I put forward a proposal before the National Assembly for a new law with regards to piracy, precisely, to allow us to review our rules of engagement so that we can better protect our country. If you remember, when the proposal was being debated, only *Parti Lepep* voted for it; Fortunately, we are a majority in the Assembly and the law was passed. And what has this law allowed us to do today? It has allowed us to pursue the pirates even outside our economic zone. In fact, the last boat that we rescued, the 'Faith', the pirates had got as far as 400 nautical miles outside Mahe. So, this shows us that this law was necessary so that we can save our fishermen and catch the pirates.

When we were taken by surprise in 2009 and the Somali pirates took our people hostage in Somalia, the trauma they went through touched me greatly and I am determined that my people will never go through all the hardship those who have been taken hostage before have gone through ; not if circumstances allow us to stop it. That was the reason why I decided that we had to review our military rules of engagement. Our CoastGuards can now take whatever action is necessary without putting the lives of our fishermen in danger. Naturally other forces at play in the region EUNAVFOR and Atlanta, they have their own rules of engagement. Perhaps it is not as necessary for them to do what we do because their citizens are not endangered the way ours are. When one of our citizens is captured, it hits all of us really hard, and that is why we must take decisive action to stop our people from being taken to Somalia. This is what makes the difference. I have said many times that the international community have to take their responsibility and think about how to solve the Somali problem. As long as there is a problem in Somalia, we will have the piracy problem. Even if we constantly maintain a large fleet policing the area, we shall still have a piracy problem. It is the Somalia problem that should be addressed, and Seychelles does not have the capacity to address that problem. It is the international community that should do it.

ME : Mr. President, another problem that people are talking a lot about is the water problem. We have heard several times that our water problem in Seychelles is not due to lack of rain because the statistics published by the meteorological services show that we do get sufficient rainfall, so our water problem really is due to lack of storage facilities. What will the government do to ensure that this problem is solved?

P : I think that we have to look at the problem from a larger perspective: a couple of years ago, we were lucky in that we had good rainfall throughout the year, so it ensured that we had water all the year round. As a small country, we have pointed out many times in international forums that the whole world must come together to address the problem of climate change. This year, we have seen how climate change is affecting not only Seychelles but also many other countries; some are affected by floods, some have crop failure, rice fields are inundated. Then you have other places that are faced with drought. So I think this year we are also facing drought because of climatic change. Don't forget that the 'La Nina' phenomenon has made things a lot worse. This year for example, we have reached December and we have received very little rain.

This should make us think about how to mitigate this problem in future. You are quite right ; we do have a reservoir problem in Seychelles. Why do we have this problem though ? It is because it costs an enormous amount of money to build a big reservoir, and we haven't yet been able to secure that kind of funding. We have discussed lengthily on a reservoir project at Grand Anse. It will cost us 800 million rupees, and though our economic reform is going well, we are not yet able to make that kind of money, not on our own at least. However, we have received a grant from the ADB after a series of negotiations with them, to finance a comprehensive study on our water systems. This study is in its final stages and will be submitted in January. It has covered all the parameters with regards to water distribution in Seychelles, which rivers never dry up, where we can build barriers to capture water in the districts that have rivers, and how this can be supplemented by our desalination project. We must consider that if the climate continues to change and we have less and less rain, we will have nothing to put in our dams. They will remain dry. We cannot guarantee that we will have the necessary amount of water to fill our dams if we build them; not if there is no rainfall.

So we must look at what other options we have. It is possible we have to combine different options. This study will allow us to do that, will allow us to have a plan based on research, which will be supported by the credibility we have established with the international community. This will make it easier for us to get financial assistance through loans or grants. For example, there is a Fund for Africa Water Facility; Once we have a viable plan to show the organisation, we can get a grant quite easily. The EIB have shown their interest to finance certain components of our plan. All this will come. However, when this plan is complete. I think that the planning stage is going quite well. In the meantime, we have to impose a lot of restrictions so that the water we have can last us till the next rainfall; but we also have to look ahead and plan further ahead. We mustn't forget that in recent times we have built a lot of houses for our people and we have generally taken giant steps in our development. All these developments, including tourism infrastructures, need water, but we have

made some of them instal their own desalination plants, which is a great help. I think it is a question of putting all our options together and see what can be done in the immediate present, what can be done in the intermediate and what can be relegated to the long term. The target is to reduce the risk of water shortage even with climatic change.