

A moment with the President October 2012

Marceline: Good evening and welcome to *A moment with the President*. Today the President will talk about a number of issues of national interest which gained prominence recently. Good evening Mr President.

President Michel: Good evening Marceline.

Marceline: Mr President, there was an important event this month when one of the wind turbines of the renewable energy project was assembled. You are behind the initiative to bring clean renewable energy to Seychelles. We have now seen the launching of the project on Mahe and another one is expected to start on La Digue. When are we going to see the start of this one?

President Michel: Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to explain the thinking behind renewable energy development, clean energy. I believe we should always aim for the future, we always have look for ways to stay relevant in a changing world. The world has to invest more in renewable energy for two reasons, and this is supported by the United Nations. Climate change is affecting us a lot and the only thing that could help in a way to mitigate the effects of climate change is to embrace renewable energy. The second reason is the volatility of petroleum prices which is impacting considerably on economies. Because the entire world depends on energy to function and survive, with prices fluctuating, and let us not forget that based on actual production of oil, in the future reserves will diminish and dry up one day. Therefore, we have to start preparing ourselves now for the generation of energy from sources that will always be around. These sources cost nothing. They are wind energy, solar energy, which are free. We have to install the equipment which can tap this energy for our use. I am proud to say that Seychelles, as a small island state, is well ahead in this renewable energy development initiative. This is clean energy. The initiative is part of our policy of participation to find ways to temper climate change. Islands are the first to be affected by climate change. The coasts, and finally the entire world, are also affected. We are participating in this crusade to save our planet. Naturally, the biggest obstacle today in the development of renewable energy is, for example, the high cost of building the wind turbines and installing the equipment. The project we have here costs around 28 million dollars (US) for only five turbines. Another solution for the future is solar panels which are also expensive, but with the progress in technology coupled with higher demand from countries developing their own capacities, costs continue to drop. I believe that now that costs are falling, it is important that we find the means, the possibilities, to invest more in these sources of energy. Do you know that if we only think of today, only of economic aspects, it will cost us a lot more later? If you do not invest in it you are blocked from the future, you forget about the future. We are a nation that is always planning ahead. We target the future and I believe we should be happy that we have taken the

right direction in the development of renewable energy, clean energy, which will later bring a lot of benefit to our country.

It is true that I personally pushed hard for the implementation of the wind turbine project. This is because I am optimistic about the future potentials of renewable energy, clean energy, and Seychelles can become a model for the world in this field. We are making use of a grant of wind turbines, and it is costing us nothing in terms of investments to install the equipment. In the future we will spend money only on the maintenance of the turbines. I think it is an exceptional opportunity for us to start this project, and we are not stopping there. We are negotiating with other countries, other organisations, ways to partner the development of solar energy generation, which will provide us with additional capacity for our energy needs and at the same time reduce our dependence on costly petroleum imports. Increasing petroleum prices push up the cost of electricity, increase our expenditures, and affect our economy. I believe this is the direction we should take. I believe it is a very good project. In fact, I can state that we have been assessing this wind turbine project for two years, which shows that we have been planning for it for a long time. There have been site surveys, environment impact studies, financial analyses. All these were done by national and international professionals. The Ministry of Finance at the time validated the financial analyses, and these were discussed with all the partners -- PUC, MLUH, environment and all others involved. They all said it is a good project and that we should go ahead with it to give us a start in renewable energy development. Now it is with a sense of satisfaction that I see it getting started.

You also asked me about La Digue. This is an interesting question. We have always said that La Digue can become the model island, where we have an integrated renewable energy development to serve the whole island. We have undertaken a lot of planning work and today we have reached the stage whereby the future development will consist not of one big project for the installation of the equipment, but will be made up of many small components. There are several organizations that are interested in participating in the integrated renewable energy development in different portions. China, for example, is contributing solar street lights. Chinese technicians will come to Seychelles to install the street lights. We will have street lights that are powered by the sun. Secondly, we have a project to generate energy from waste. There is another project to install solar panels at the La Digue school. La Digue will become the first place in Seychelles where the school will get its energy from solar panels. There will be other small projects that will follow later, to add components to the integrated renewable energy project there. We also want La Digue to become a model for ecological development. All these components put together will help move us in the right direction. Other plans comprise of electric transport on La Digue and I believe that in a short while after all these projects are implemented they will help us realize the dream we have for La Digue.

Marceline: Mr President, now that you have talked about solar panels for the schools, we know that some homes have installed their own solar panels to produce their own energy. But when talking to people in business they say that when they approach individuals, the individuals do not really want to invest in this sector because they do not know yet if PUC will buy the excess energy they will generate. They are still waiting for legislation. Are we going to see the new law soon? How will this happen?

President Michel: Marceline, this is a very good question you have asked me. Actually, the bill is being finalised and will be presented to the assembly soon. And this piece of legislation will be the key in the development of renewable energy in this direction. Businesses and homes that have invested in solar panels can utilize the electricity generated and the excess energy may be sold to PUC. The businesses and homes will make savings from bills they were paying before, and together with revenue from the sale of electricity to PUC they will recover the costs of investments. Therefore, this bill is to encourage Seychellois to invest in solar panels for electricity generation.

The equipment is a component of renewable energy but we also have to look at other incentives we can give to enable businesses to have easier access to this form of electricity generation. We can also have businesses set up expressly for the maintenance of these investments. Now we have the wind turbines, later we will have the solar panels on the houses. But we are aiming at a development that is vast, and which we call solar farms. We are talking about solar farms that can generate large amount of electricity. India, through its President who came here recently, offered us a grant of 25 million dollars, and we are negotiating with that country to use part of the money to fund renewable energy projects. This may provide for investment in biomass and secondly, to also look at ways to set up a solar farm for the generation of electricity using solar panels. I believe we are on the right path and all these are positive developments taking place.

Marceline: A last question on renewable energy. We have been told on one or two occasions that the wind turbines, after they have been installed, would generate 11% of the electricity supplied to the PUC grid. Are we in our homes expecting a reduction, soon, in the electricity tariffs?

President Michel: This alone will not bring about an immediate reduction in tariffs, because the impact will be minimal compared to what PUC is spending presently to generate a large amount of electricity. The fact is that with all the developments happening, we have to invest more in generators for PUC to produce all the electricity that will be needed. In the meantime, we have to continue developing renewable energy to replace the conventional method of generating electricity. With time we will achieve this. It will be cheaper in future to produce energy from renewable sources. For the time being it will not have a considerable effect.

Marceline: Another of your initiatives will soon start bearing its first fruits. The first cohort of the University of Seychelles will be graduating soon. As I said you were also behind the creation of the University of Seychelles, and now that we are about to welcome the graduation of the first group of students what is your feeling? Is it another accomplishment of your vision for Seychelles?

President Michel: I share the pride of a remarkable achievement, the feeling of accomplishment of a nation that dared, a nation that had a dream, a nation that realised the dream. I think this in itself is a sense of pride, not only for me, but the feeling of the whole Seychellois nation. When I announced the decision there were people who ridiculed me. There were people who asked if I were crazy, if I really believed Seychelles could have a university. But

I think that what was important was that the entire Seychellois nation supported my initiative. The entire Seychellois nation realized that it was a good thing for Seychelles, but it was my passion because I was confident of the future. I have confidence in the Seychellois youth, and the youth are the future of a country. The passion in a way rallied the Seychellois to understand and realize that we had to support the project. And all of us together, all Seychellois who were involved, worked hard, and put in a lot of effort to turn the dream of our university into a reality. Today we are proud of our accomplishment. Today our university is recognized internationally and our main partner is the University of London. On top of that we are also in partnership with other universities that are assisting us with the different courses that we offer. All of this contributed to earn recognition for our university. Its diplomas and degrees are recognized at international level. This in itself is a big achievement for a small country like Seychelles. When we do an analysis of the past 10 years we find that around 1,025 Seychellois students attended various universities, and it costs around SR600,000 to train one student. Now we see the advantage of having our own university. We are able to train more of our young people, more students are able to go to university, because of the savings we make from local training. It costs a lot more to send the students overseas. Now we can train more of our Seychellois at university level. My vision is to ensure that in future there will be a graduate from each Seychellois family. I know this sounds ambitious but I know we can realize it. I know there is a lot of development in our country and this is happening rapidly, and that we need to train as many of our young people as possible, provide them with education and university training to enable them to take up key positions that will continue to be available in the future. And now with our fibre optic cable that will be boosted with other means, I believe it gives Seychelles another platform for us to double the development into the future. All of this will require graduates in different fields. And if we are aiming for a country of excellence in the region therefore the education and training we give our young people has no price attached. We will need young people with degrees in almost all professions. For example, it will be ideal for all our teachers in primary and secondary schools to be in possession of either a first degree or a more advanced degree. This will enhance the quality of education we provide. It improves the competence of our people, in technology, in health. As much as we can train our young people at a higher level, this will enable them to gain more knowledge and strengthen their capacity to take our country's development to the higher level. I think we should all aim for positive things in the future. And I am happy to note that the Seychellois people are supporting this project in order to take the education of our children to a higher level.

Marceline: Mr President, do you believe that the youth are aware that now that they have access to education from the crèche to university they need to seize the opportunity? I ask this because when you look around there are some 200 students doing A-level but not all attain the standard that qualifies them for university studies. This is the first part of the question. The other question: Will the university offer more technical courses, such as for SIT and Maritime School students who can make it to university?

President Michel: Firstly, I think there is a need to change the perception that if one is not gifted academically one can only attend technical institutions. I think we need to have a new way of thinking. Even if one is doing well academically, one may pursue a career in a technical

field. We have training institutions, such as the maritime school, technical school, tourism academy, which are of different levels. These are infrastructures that have been set up, and now we only have to get our children to use these facilities. Once again, it depends on education, sensitization. It begins with the parents themselves. It is the culture of inculcating in their children the necessity to take their education seriously, the necessity to take schooling seriously, to study hard for the best grades possible, to be able to blossom in the future. This is how we did it before, and this is what we should continue to promote. The sensitization, the education must begin at home. In the schools, too, the teachers should continually guide the children towards career choices they are able and happy to pursue. It does not depend only on academic level but also on what the children feel they are gifted to do, and aim for that. And I believe we should continually develop and boost our vocational institutions to elevate their training levels, too. After some time there could be young people with results that are good enough for university studies, for university degrees. I believe we should keep education as an integrated institution with several branches to meet the different needs of the youth. But we all should continually sensitise our young people to assume the responsibility for their education.

Marceline: Mr President, we now move on to other issues. You have made three visits recently, and after you spoke of the need to take more actions to tackle the social scourges. Anse Aux Pins, for example, is one of the places where a lot of people are unemployed. The level of criminality is also high. When you went to Praslin you also talked about the level of criminality, yet there are several measures, several mechanisms in place, but it does not appear that these are bringing positive results. Therefore, what are the other options?

President Michel: OK, the situations partly reflect the seriousness of the social scourges we have talked about on several occasions and which we are continually trying to tackle in our country. The scourges are not a phenomenon specific to Seychelles. Social problems exist in all countries for several reasons and at different levels. All countries that see these as a problem take certain measures to tackle the issues. There is a problem that is, to a certain extent, spreading throughout these countries. It is the problem of drugs that is so widespread that it is responsible for the creation of other social scourges. As examples, we look at families that are not taking care of their children, families that are adrift. Drugs may be the principal cause of these problems. There are problems of criminality, theft, other issues, which are the results of drug abuse. There are many other problems that are linked to this principal scourge. This is one of the sources of the problems which all countries are trying to address. Tackling the drug issue could, in the end, help contain the social problems. Here in Seychelles, what we have decided to do starting from last year, is to say we do have this problem and we are taking decisive action to deal with it. Government alone cannot overcome a national social problem. Government needs the participation of all the Seychellois people, all the different agencies, all the different stakeholders. It is for this reason that I launched a national campaign. A committee was formed, meetings were held in the districts to get the opinions of people, opinions on how to tackle the problems in the country. This first exercise has been completed and a plan formulated. Soon there will be further discussions on the proposals with the major stakeholders in the development sectors, and to find ways to address the issues. At the same time, the population will be consulted again. There will be more discussions with the people to

find out how they can contribute to help the implementation of the plan. It is only when a people take ownership of a decision, take ownership of a work we have to undertake that we can succeed. Government on its own will not be able to succeed if it does it alone. We all need to join together as a people. We say OK we do have a problem, that we need to contribute to tackle it. We need the communities, the churches, the NGOs and government to work together. And this is what we are doing. And I think this will in a way help tackle the source of the problems. We are also aware that there are also criminality and other issues to deal with. Concerning employment, there is work in the country. Now we have to sensitise people on the necessity to work. It is better to work and earn your living honestly instead of stealing from somebody who has worked hard to earn a living honestly. There are people who earn their living on things they have stolen. I believe sensitization and education are what we should continually do. At the same time I believe the law must be seen to be present, the law should be seen to be effective, that it will not tolerate actions that affect the lives of honest people who are working. And I believe that the police recently have done a lot of work. The police have undergone reorganisation, although there is the perception that there is a lot of criminality. Although there is criminality, and truly there is criminality, there has been progress made. The results does not come overnight. After putting a new system in place, after building it up, it takes some time for it to achieve the objective. We also know that since February the police set up a new section, and it deals with more serious crimes. Police street patrol has increased, and today you hear from people that it is better now than say a couple of months ago. Additionally, in order to render the reorganization more effective, we had to bring in police professionals from overseas. And they are working, they are helping with the training of Seychellois. Let us not forget that when we speak it is as if the entire police force should be Seychellois, but we do not have enough of our own people. We tried to recruit, we placed advertisements in the *Nation*, on the radio. We invite people to join the police. We need people for the army. We do get a few but not enough. Because of our small population and the many developments, there are employment choices. Today people can choose what they want to do. But when there is a need to focus on a particular problem, you have to seek temporary assistance from international organizations, or look for people in the world who have the expertise to help temporarily and also to continually train the Seychellois to take over. This is temporary. But the professional input is valuable. It shows how the work should be done. Naturally mistakes happen. We, Seychellois or foreigners, are all humans. When humans make mistakes we fix them. I believe there are problems, but we have to address the issues. We will not see the results overnight. It takes some time, and I believe the police are doing a lot of work and already we do see some progress. The police have to intensify their operations in order to move forward a little faster and reduce, as much as possible, the cases of criminality.

Marceline: Mr President, I don't know if you have noticed something. There was a time, before the arrival of the Gurkhas, when Seychellois were loudly voicing their concern at the level of criminality which was regarded as high, and that our police could not cope, that if there was a need to bring in foreigners, let us bring in the foreigners. Even SBC broadcast a programme in which people said that. The foreigners are here, and now a lot of people are complaining -- the foreigners are abusing their power, they are using excessive force, they are mercenaries, etc. There are also the issues of jail terms for prisoners, burglary, etc. We were saying that the

sentences should not be served concurrently because they spend little time behind bars. We were saying that the sentences should be served consecutively, that the sentences should increase. There are people who say the sentences are too long, and that the focus should be on rehabilitation. If a youth receives a sentence of 22 years, 20, in prison for whatever offence, it is too much. What is your opinion on that? It looks like the reactions are similar to complaints about the weather. When there is sun we shout at the sun. When there is rain we complain that there is too much rain.

President Michel: Marceline I think you have answered the question. Unfortunately, we know that there are people in Seychelles -- not many of them -- who, when there is rain, scream for the sun. When there is sun they shout that there is too much sun. For them everything is never good, everything is bad. To them everything is black. They never see anything right. They only see things that are bad. I believe there are personal reasons, especially political, for these people to say this. I believe that a lot of the comments you have related have their origin in cheap politics, are for cheap politics. For personal reasons, some people are continually using these comments in their cheap-politics campaign. But I believe they are only a small group of people. The majority of people I talk to, and with whom I am in contact, tell me they are happy to see that the new measures in the police force are bringing some order, and that at least they are able to walk in town, they are not facing aggression like until recently. They are also happy with the patrol in the districts. Still there are certain problems remaining but not as before. The majority of Seychellois appreciates it. But, do whatever you want, the small group you are referring to will always find faults. Even if you bring in angels from heaven they will still look for something to criticize. Let us not let this annoy us. Let us continue our work, and do what is right. As long as the Seychellois people appreciate what we are doing I believe this is what matters to me. I work for the people. I do not work just for a few people who spend their time finding faults only.

Marceline: Mr President, let us move to another subject. Recently, and also in the past, we've seen foreign workers expressing their unhappiness with the treatment they are getting from employers. They were also claiming their rights regarding their salaries. They said they had not been paid their salaries for quite some time. What is the position of government on this? Is the government putting in place measures to ensure that the dignity and rights of the foreign workers are respected?

President Michel: This applies not only for foreign workers. I believe it concerns government whenever employers are not treating the foreign and Seychellois workers well. This government does not tolerate it. In the past there may have been less supervision, and this has allowed the contractors, the employers, to treat the foreign workers this way. Government has now taken hold of the situation. The ministry responsible for employment is taking steps to beef up its inspection unit. There will be faster response and more frequent inspection of work places. There will also be more inspection of the living quarters to see if the conditions are good and are of international standards. The ministry will also undertake to ensure that the contracts are respected. It may take necessary legal action in cases of mistreatment of workers by their employers. This is something we do not tolerate, and should not happen. The measures the

Ministry of Employment is introducing will ensure that employers who, for no acceptable reason, are not paying their workers or are lodging them in conditions that are not humane, could be prosecuted and convicted if needed be. We are a civilized country. We should not only treat our Seychellois workers as should be, but also do the same to foreign workers who come to our country to contribute to our development. We have to make sure that their employers treat them well. The government is reinforcing the measures needed to ensure that this is achieved. From what has been done already I can state that the number of visits to work places has doubled. This year there have been 891 visits by officers of the ministry. Last year there were 456 visits. It is not enough, and we need to pay more attention to these issues.

Marceline: Mr President, one last question. Soon it will be one year since our two Seychellois brothers, Mr Rolly Tambara and Mr Marc Songoire, have been in Somalia as hostages. Maybe you are in a position to talk about the progress in the attempt to have them released?

President Michel: This is something that touches the hearts of all Seychellois. It pains their families. It affects the whole Seychellois nation. I am sure that all Seychellois are praying every day for their return home. I, too, never miss to include them in my daily prayers. We have not abandoned them. During the past year we have been doing everything possible, at all levels -- security, diplomacy -- to get them home. I have contacted almost all the world capitals that are involved with the Somalia crisis. I asked for assistance so that we can remove our two brothers from that country. Our efforts have intensified recently. We continue our efforts but I cannot give details of what we are doing. I am optimistic that we will soon find a solution for the return of our brothers.

Marceline: Mr President, thank you very much for spending a moment with us. On that note we hope that Mr Rolly Tambara and Mr Mark Songoire will soon be reunited with their families.