

A moment with the President (July 2009)

Marceline Evenor: Good evening. This is Marceline Evenor and I am replacing Antoine Onézime for '*A Moment with the President.*' Welcome. Today the President will talk about international relations and the benefits that these brings for Seychelles. Since he became President, Mr. Michel has put in considerable effort to ensure that Seychelles gets its due recognition on the international scene. He has also put a lot of emphasis on developing the friendly relations we have with other countries. In order to do this, the President has been on many official visits and has equally hosted many official missions by other Heads of State and other personalities. He has engaged in many discussions with other Heads of State and organizations and has spoken in international forums. So, to start with, Mr. President, can you tell us why you have placed so much emphasis on international relations?

President Michel: From the beginning of my mandate, I have felt that in order for Seychelles to survive better in this world that is fast globalizing and transforming very quickly, we need to become more visible and change the way we have been conducting our diplomatic relations. I feel that we need to give a new dimension to our diplomacy, in the economic sense. It is the kind of active diplomatic relations that will enhance the image of Seychelles on the international scene and help increase our importance and interest in our country. It is with this in mind that I decided to approach the issue on different fronts, starting with establishing contacts and friendships with different countries, those that have traditionally been our partners as well as those that we can establish new partnerships with, in the interest of our country. My first visits were intended to reinforce our relations with our traditional partners, but I have on another level developed better relations with countries that are fast becoming rising economies and are powers for strong partnerships. These include China, India, countries from the Gulf where there is a lot of wealth. There are also our neighbours like South Africa, countries in the region like Madagascar, Mauritius... The latest round of diplomatic engagements has been mainly to ensure Seychelles' inclusion in regional organizations such as SADC. We have reestablished our status as a member, and we can thus benefit from the projects run by this organization. We can also make our presence felt in the region and this further gives us the necessary clout to reinforce our relations with such traditional partners as the European Union and other countries. I also think that the international forums where we have made clear our position has established us as a country with a lot of credibility. When we express our opinion, the world listens to us and respects us. We have been especially active in furthering the cause of small island states, which has resulted in big organizations like the United Nations looking into the mitigation of natural disasters caused by climate change in

small island states. This has shown that we can really be a leader in environmental issues and other issues of vulnerability of small island states.

Marceline Evenor: So, Mr. President, after all this hard work to establish our position on the international scene, and with our reinforced relations with friendly nations and the new economic powers, all recognizing our vulnerability, concretely, what do we get out of it ?

President Michel: I believe that all the effort I have put in during the last five years of my mandate has effectively brought good results for our country. If I may give some concrete examples, we have reinforced our position within the European Union. Today the EU is supporting Seychelles in all of its endeavours. Our economic reform, for example, and we have renegotiated our fisheries agreements so that Seychelles gets more out of them. We have an exemplary partnership with France and we are developing the same with other members of the Union. Of course this has helped us to extend the support that we get. For example, they have given us their support on the IMF Board, the World Bank, and the Paris Club. The latter has in fact helped us to have a large portion of our debts written off. All these are the results of an active diplomacy which has re-established Seychelles' credibility on the international scene. Our relations with China has resulted in many schools being built. The Chinese built the schools at Baie Lazare, Au Cap, etc... they are building the Anse Royale Hospital, they have built the parliament building and will soon start the construction of the 'Palais de Justice'. The whole court complex is a donation from China, and we regularly benefit from other donations and grants to support our budget. If we could quantify the donations given to us by China, they would amount to more than 500 million rupees, which is very substantial.

With India as well, we are benefiting a lot from cooperation projects. I visited India recently and currently we are receiving help in the security department, specifically training in the Coast Guards and other areas. India has also opened lines of credit to us which will allow us to increase our imports. In the case of South Africa, I had a personal relationship with President Mbeki and this has furthered our relations with that country. We have also received donations of more than 3 million rands from South Africa, and we are also getting South Africa's support within SADC, including payment of our membership fee. Japan has helped us a lot in the fisheries sector, especially traditional fishing. Today we are seeing the construction of an artisanal fishing port and another coastal regional facility at Bel Ombre. The Japanese government has assured me that it will continue its support of the Seychelles fishing industry and that they will be financing a comprehensive study with the aim of mitigating the effects of coastal erosion. Let us now look at the Gulf region and the close ties I have developed with the rich countries there, over the years. I have developed a special friendship with certain leaders in this region, principally Abu Dhabi, and recently, we have received a lot of donations from Abu Dhabi. We have received a surveillance plane to help us in the fight against piracy. We have

received approximately 4 million dollars worth of equipment for our hospital and we also recently received a grant of 15 million dollars to help with our economic reform. This is why we should be able to turn to our friends for sustenance, especially in such trying times as economic reform. Recently, our friends in the Gulf have announced that they are donating another 30 million dollars to help build houses for the Seychellois people. They have also promised a diagnostic centre at the hospital with modern equipment, so as to ensure better health care for the Seychellois people. They are helping us in our endeavour to provide enough water for our consumption during the dry periods. All these are tangible results of all the official visits and the friendly relations I have cultivated with these countries, resulting in positive benefits for the Seychellois people.

Marceline Evenor: Mr. President, there are certain criticisms from the opposition that the relations Seychelles has developed with the Arabs simply means that the government is selling the country to them. What is your comment on that ?

President Michel: Well Marceline, I am the President of all Seychellois, and I am not working only to please the opposition. I work for all Seychellois. All these official visits I make are in the interest of the Seychellois people, to cultivate partnerships that will benefit us all, and that is all that counts, not what the Opposition thinks, or whether they criticise or not. The Seychellois people need a President who is hardworking and enterprising, all in their interest. That is why they elected me. Sheik Khalifa is a king and he has a residence here in Seychelles. When he comes here, it is for a private visit, and if during his private visit he decides to come and see me at State house, it is out of courtesy. It is also out of courtesy that he invited me to his residence for a cup of tea after a courtesy call at State House, and during that visit, he announced that he would make a donation of 30 million dollars to the people Seychelles to build houses for them. He also announced that he was going to build a diagnostic centre for us to improve our health system. I see nothing wrong with that. It is only a matter of being more flexible in our protocol to allow such a friendship. I would do the same for any other king or Head of State who comes here and wish to have a personal friendship.

Marceline Evenor: Mr. President, as you have said, Seychelles has received help and support from many countries -- India, China, France, UAE... What do they get in return from Seychelles?

President Michel: In international relations, it is not a question of giving back favours. It is a question of friendly relationships, partnerships, good neighbourliness. That is what is important. If you look at Seychelles' position in the Indian Ocean, we are placed very strategically and that means that we can have an influence on the issue of peace and security in the region. I think that all our neighbours understand this, understand that in order to ensure peace and security and thus allow the region to undergo a stable development, it is important that we collaborate. When those countries with means help us, they are doing so because they

want us to remain stable, they are helping us develop our democracy, develop our economy. When we all collaborate, and when we are all stable, the whole region remains stable and our economies develop. All our collaborators understand our position and we understand theirs even if our principles might not always be the same. We cooperate on issues of international interest, on different issues being debated for a common purpose. It doesn't mean that because they have helped us, let's say, in the economic aspect, we have to follow their principles or do what they tell us to do. I think we have a very normal understanding and everybody appreciates the fact that Seychelles has its position and its principles and that we are ready to defend those principles in any situation. Let us show mutual respect.

Marceline Evenor: To end, Mr. President, how do you see these friendships developing in future?

President Michel: I think that there is every potential for these friendships to grow and develop. And may I repeat, in the interest of us all, that I think we should appreciate the fact that all these partnerships we have established are to our benefit. They will help us to have an open economy that is modern and solid. These countries with which we have developed friendships have the means to invest in our country. Abu Dhabi, for example, is investing in a big hotel here, the Four Seasons. And it will soon start a few more projects, a tourism complex at Grande Police. Again, these developments will bring cash to Seychelles, will create employment and allow more Seychellois to earn a decent living. There is another project at Anse a la Mouche being undertaken by Qatar for the building of a hotel, though it is facing some delays due to financial issues. Once completed, it will also boost our economy, bringing in more tourists and creating more opportunities for the Seychellois people. It is the same for other investments that the European Union and other countries with which we have signed bilateral agreements. They will bring benefits to our country. I see a future in which we have opened our economy, with more investments that will create more wealth for our people. This will create the potential to develop a better society with an economy that can support our social programmes. Naturally, we want to do all this in an atmosphere of peace, with responsibility and in a way that we can all look ahead with confidence.

Marceline Evenor: Thank you very much Mr. President.

President Michel: Thank you, Marceline.

Marceline Evenor: We will end this programme here, and rendez-vous for the next programme in one month's time. Good night.