

PRESS RELEASE

NGOs WELCOME PRESIDENTIAL COMMITMENT TO EFFECTIVE PROTECTION OF GUYANA'S RIVERS

President David Granger has called on world leaders "to pay continuous attention and unceasing action" for the "preservation and protection of the Guiana Shield as a vital source of the world's freshwater reserves". Policy Forum Guyana (PFG) warmly welcomes this unequivocal recognition by President Granger that the Guyana Shield - the source of almost one-fifth of the world's freshwater resources - has a vital role to play in a world of rising demands and dwindling sources of freshwater.

President Granger specifically stated "Rivers must be protected from pollution, including that caused by environmental degradation and the discharge of effluent from industry, mining and agriculture."

The seriousness of Guyana's leadership role on freshwater will be measured by the steps taken by the Government to protect Guyana's rivers. Not only are the Cuyuni, Puruni, the Potaro and stretches of the Mazaruni in Region 7 and 8, the Baramita, Barama, Aruca and Kaituma rivers in Region 1 severely polluted, but untold numbers of tributaries and creeks are heavily poisoned before they flow out into these major rivers.

Despite efforts by the current and previous Governments to cease issuing river mining licenses below the 4th parallel of latitude, expansion of river mining by likely illegal, mainly Brazilian, miners is taking place in the South Rupununi at Marudi. These activities are affecting the head waters of the Essequibo through the Rewa, Kwitaro and Kuyuwini rivers and their tributaries. These waterways---are home to over 490 species of fish rendering them globally significant levels of bio-diversity. Moreover, they are a major spawning ground for many fish. They also support the wild life of the area and are a source of food for local communities. The area hosts spiritual sites and intact forests. Pollution of these waters has resulted in less fish and wildlife. Miners have diverted creeks and streams and freshwater has become scarce in some places.

These activities irrevocably threaten poisoning of the headwaters of the Essequibo, Guyana's largest river. Mercury levels well above WHO levels of documented in the residents of Parabara-- the only community directly settled on a river waters and its ingestion by fish, effectively expose anyone consuming such fish caught along the entire length of the rivers.

Recent local presentation of studies undertaken by the Frankfurt Zoological Society of mercury in Colombia's Amazonian rivers attested to massively high levels of mercury in communities which themselves have never engaged in mining. The implication of these studies for Guyana is

that contaminated fish migrating from higher reaches of the rivers will socialize the hazards of mercury to communities far from those currently considered vulnerable.

Apart from the dangers posed by mercury, the contamination of rivers from decades of mining effluent renders rivers unusable for any domestic use by communities and interferes with river currents in ways dangerous to river traffic.

In the context of President Granger's assertion that "river pollution impacts adversely on water quality, on health and the economic and social well-being of citizens", nothing short of a ban on all river mining is required. Beyond halting on-going destruction, rehabilitation and restoration of rivers to meet the needs identified by the President require a range of legal and administrative measures. Recent statements by leaders of the South Central Rupununi Development Association (SCRDA) have pointed to the intimate role rivers play in indigenous cultures. A start in this direction was taken by six South Rupununi communities who formed a mediation group hoping to engage with mining associations and Government to counter illegal mining in the Marudi area.

More joint ventures engaging indigenous communities in the legal and administrative protection of rivers of this nature are urgently required across the mining Districts. In recent years India, Colombia and New Zealand have all taken to devise forms of legal protection for rivers along with management arrangements which recognize the historic role of indigenous peoples in maintaining the pristine quality of rivers.

South Central Rupununi Development Committee Policy Forum Guyana

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**Contact: Cedric Buckly President SCPDA 678-9239
Mike McCormack Convenor Policy Forum Guyana 227-4911
policyforumgy@gmail.com**