

A Reporter's Notebook: Death's Somber Setting

B12

By JON NORDHEIMER
Special to The New York Times

GEORGETOWN, Guyana, Dec. 4 — The rainy season has brought lowering, stone-colored skies to this corner of the Caribbean, and the sea is not the magic blue of the tourist islands but is stained brown like a damp, muddy doormat.

The cause of the discoloration is not the Demerara River, which empties into the sea at Georgetown. Though it is coffee-colored and wide, the Demerara alone could not paint the sea with such a broad, melancholy brush.

The true source is the mouth of the Amazon, nearly 1,000 miles to the east and south, where billions of tons of silt washed from the interior of the continent are picked up by the ocean's current and swept around the shoulder of the continent to be deposited in an infinite shower of particles along these shallow, muddy shores.

Setting Is Somber

It is a somber setting for the events of the last two weeks with world attention turning to Guyana, its capital and the lonely jungle outpost of death at Jonestown.

However history treats the madness that resulted in more than 900 deaths at the People's Temple commune and nine others in related violence, it seems a remarkable juxtaposition that a problem with roots in America's urban and technological society was played out in this wild and remote setting.

Guyana is a Socialist-Marxist state, the only one on the South American continent. "Comrade" is the most frequently used honorific among bureaucrats. It is also a country whose Prime Minister, Forbes Burnham, has several limousines at his disposal, including a Rolls-Royce and a Cadillac.

Shortages abound in Guyana's bereft economy. A sign in a combined bakery and pharmacy in Georgetown: "Kindly Bring Along Your Empty Bottles for Medicines." Guyanese have great difficulty getting cigarettes, soap, tomato paste, canned juice, toilet paper, flour, onions, potatoes, garlic, cocoa, sardines and salmon. Imports of chocolate, prunes, raisins and walnuts are banned, presumably to promote local equivalents.

Seawalls and other flat vertical surfaces still hold graffiti for the constitutional referendum held last July amid allegations of election fraud. Some of the slogans, put up by supporters of Prime Minister Burnham's ruling People's National Congress Party, had references to destroying "the Mouse."

Inquiries led to the explanation that, because of high illiteracy in Guyana, the Government had selected symbols to represent the two major parties on the ballot. For its own party, which

supported the constitutional change that would allow the Prime Minister to remain in power indefinitely, the symbol of a house was chosen, since the Government has promised to provide housing for all Guyanese. For the opposition People's Progressive Party, strongly against the change, the Government selected the symbol of a slinking, long-tailed rodent.

Trick Is Turned Around

The opposition, with the help of a deft cartoonist, turned the trick into an advantage. Posters soon began appearing showing a cute little round-eared character not unlike Mickey Mouse, packing a powerful wallop and talking in the patois of the average Guyanese.

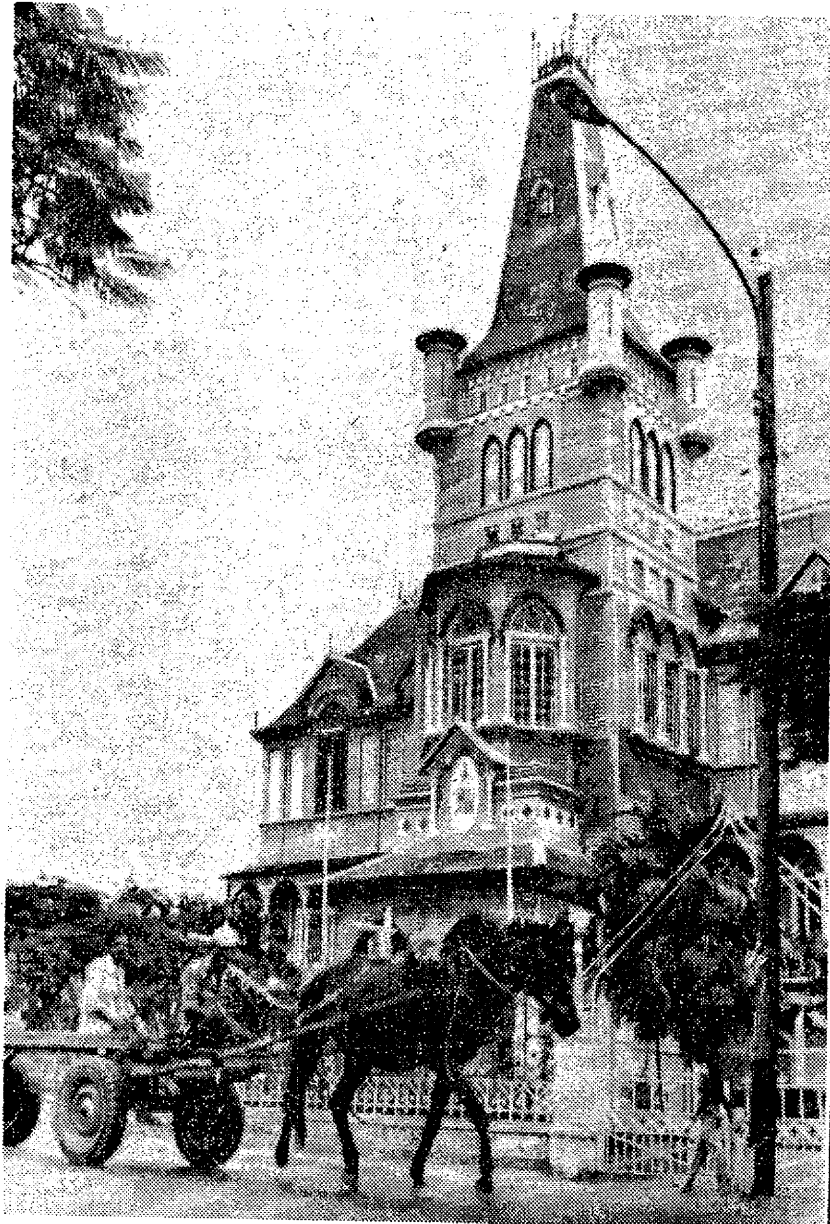
When the charges grew that the Government was rigging the vote, the People's Progressive Party called for a boycott of the referendum, and the cute mouse in the cartoon started carrying a cricket bat marked "Boycott," which also happens to be the name of the popular black West Indian, Geoff Boycott, who is captain of the English cricket team.

The referendum boycott was successful. The Government claimed a smashing popular victory anyway, and the Prime Minister can now presumably stay in power until the National Parliament, which he controls, gets around to writing a new constitution.

The Rev. Andrew Morrison is a gaunt Jesuit who could have walked out of the pages of a Graham Greene novel. He is the editor of *The Catholic Standard*, a weekly church publication that for many Guyanese is the only source of news that is not controlled by the two political parties. Before this summer's referendum, the Government-controlled presses were denied to Father Morrison, and he was forced to print a one-page mimeographed sheet as his election edition instead of the regular eight-page tabloid.

Since then, he has located a private jobber who can print a maximum run of 5,000 copies of a four-page, 8-by-10-inch newspaper every week. The problem is that the printer has a limited inventory of newsprint, which is also controlled by the Government. At the moment, *The Standard* is printed on paper the color of a canary, and Father Morrison is hardened to the complaints of "yellow journalism."

However, the yellow paper stock will be exhausted early next year, and the weekly will then be printed on the only choice left, stock colored a flamingo pink, which in a Socialist state isn't impossibly bad. When the pink paper is gone, Father Morrison will have to find some new miracle to keep *The Standard* going.



The New York Times/Neal Boenzi

A horse-drawn trailer passing the Georgetown City Hall. The Guyanese capital is built of native wood, with architectural examples that range from elaborate gingerbread mansions to neo-Socialist boxes.