

OBITUARIES

3/7/97 President Cheddi Jagan Dies; Reformed Guyanese Economy

From News Services

Cheddi Jagan, 78, the president of Guyana, died March 6 at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, three weeks after suffering a heart attack. He had undergone heart surgery to clear a blocked artery after having been hospitalized at Walter Reed since Feb. 16, when he was flown to Washington on a U.S. military jet.

Mr. Jagan, a dentist who was trained at Howard University, helped lead Guyana to independence from British colonial rule. As head of the People's Progressive Party, he was elected president in 1992, ending 26 consecutive years of People's National Congress rule.

He was an outspoken Marxist for decades but more recently had softened his stand, saying he supported free-market economic policies.

As president, he steered Guyana toward what some economists called one of the most successful economic adjustments anywhere, including a 1996 agreement to reduce by 67 percent the country's debt with the Paris Club of creditor nations.

From a high of 105 percent in 1989, inflation fell to 4.5 percent in 1996, as the country opened to foreign investors eager to tap vast resources in mining, forestry and agriculture.

Guyana, a country of 800,000 people, is the only English-speaking country in South America.

Mr. Jagan became Guyana's first prime minister after Guyana, then a British colony, was granted self-government in 1961, but he was deposed three years later after race riots.

That enabled his longtime rival, Forbes Burnham, to lead the country out of colonial rule in 1966, and Burnham's People's National Congress ruled with an iron fist for the next 26 years with a mix of state control and

socialist experiments.

Mr. Jagan was born in Port Mourant. While in the United States to study dentistry, he married Janet Rosenberg, of Chicago, a relative of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 for espionage.

He returned to Guyana in 1943 and practiced dentistry before forming the People's Progressive Party in 1948 together with Burnham.

He first headed a People's Progressive Party government in 1953, after colonially administered elections. But six months later, Britain suspended the constitution, charging communist subversion, and Mr. Jagan was imprisoned for six months.

Operating out of a ramshackle building in downtown Georgetown, overflowing with Marxist literature

and posters, Mr. Jagan kept his party alive as a force in Guyana politics, returning to power in 1992 to find his nation bankrupt.

Mr. Jagan's party represents much of the Asian majority, descendants of indentured laborers brought from India in the 19th century.

Samuel Hinds, an executive in the bauxite industry who was Mr. Jagan's running mate and prime minister, will succeed him as president.

During his years as a Marxist, Mr. Jagan had been a frequent visitor to communist Cuba. He antagonized Washington and became a target of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. He was the author of books on Caribbean history, including "The Role of the CIA in Guyana and Its Activities Throughout the World," published in 1967.

The Soviet Union awarded Mr. Jagan the Lenin Centenary Medal and the Order of Peace and Friendship Among Peoples.

Mr. Jagan's survivors include his wife, two children and five grandchildren.