I thank Dr. George Norton, Minister of Social Cohesion for asking me, again, to speak at Social Cohesion Day celebrations.

I welcome the distinguished presence of Mr. Akbar Khan, our Guyana-born Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

On May 5 last while addressing a gathering on Arrival Day, His Excellency, President David Granger, reminded us that our country’s diversity should be seen as an asset. He said:

“I am proud to be in a country of many races. I don’t want to live in a garden made up of just grass. I want to live in a garden with beautiful, colourful flowers”.

He said those poetic words as he reminded us that “Social cohesion recognizes that Guyana is now and always will be multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious”.

Today, before me, are the colourful petals of our Guyana flowers, diversified but beautiful, a sparkling spectacle of coexistence and social cohesion.
But I am speaking to you today on the eve of the third anniversary of the 2015 Regional and General Elections, which were held on May 11. For the first time in 50 years, our people chose to end one-party political domination of our government. In this land of six races, for the first time ever, we voted into office a government comprising six parties.

So, Guyana is not only multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious. She is also multi-party with a Rainbow Coalition that has the image of the various ethnic and cultural strands of our society.

I mention those elections not to drag politics into this event but only to tell you that social cohesion is better promoted in societies where their leadership is inclusive. Such broad leadership helps to encourage willingness of members of society, especially divided societies, to cooperate with each other, to survive and prosper.

It is difficult to make laws for social cohesion. It is a process that develops from healthy social relations, from inclusive leadership example and norms of behavior that are tolerant of differences. Social cohesion flows from conventions where the society, over time, learns to respect the differences among the various sections and groupings in their midst, and to build trust between and among groups of different ethnic, cultural or religious groups.

Social cohesion creates a sense of belonging, and fights against exclusion and marginalization of any group of persons on the basic of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, faith, occupation, age, etc. We saw here today a five-year old girl, an infant, saying prayers for the Bahai Faith. So age must not be a disqualification.

As I speak to you today, our country is wrapped in mourning over the cold-blooded mass murder, a massacre, of Guyanese fishermen in the high seas off eastern Suriname, and closer to Cayenne.

I am the son of a fishing family, and members of my family are still operating in the sea, often in Surinamese waters, also. It is enough for fishermen to contend with the angry and sometimes treacherous waves and unfriendly weather as they risk their lives and
always place their loved ones in anxiety, anguish and uncertainty. But to share the sea with murderous men is at the root of the tragedy that has claimed so many lives.

It is apparent, from information surfacing, that there has been a breakdown in social relations among sections of the fishermen, perhaps with one crime or a series of criminal acts, triggering a deadly vendetta. That beastly act would have far-reaching effects on social cohesion, in Suriname and in Guyana as the pain, loss and grief of survivors and bereaved relatives are multiplied.

In a situation such as this, our notion of sharing the fate of our brothers and sisters require that we give solidarity to the victims. Let their loved ones know that they are not alone! So I ask that we all stand and bow our heads in dignified respect in memory of the murdered men.

Thank you.

Living peacefully together has been a challenge to mankind and their societies for centuries. Where social cohesion broke down, there have been wars, massacre, holocausts, partition of states, mass migration and mass sufferings. Guyana must never go there!

There have been many conferences on and studies into the importance of social cohesion to the development of society. Political scientists found that countries and regions with greater inter-group cohesion tend not only to avoid conflicts but to have better public service delivery, financial accountability and democratic values.

Where communities get together, they are better able to press demands and to achieve quality health and education services. The different groups think and act together, and for the betterment of all. They have less time to accuse each other, fight each other, or waste energy on constantly promoting hate responses to each other.

The studies show that over time, as we interact with each other across different backgrounds, we can develop unwritten rules on how to interact with each other.
I have read studies on the experiences of multi-ethnic countries such as New Zealand and Canada, and they have reported great successes in how social groups with ethnic and cultural diversities interact and cooperate. Guyana has also become a good example of our peoples from different historical and cultural backgrounds living in peace, as one people and as one nation.

Canada shows the lowest percentage of persons who said that they object to immigrants, or to persons from different ethnic or religious groups being their neighbours. This is evidence of social cohesion, of people accepting and respecting diversity which has been described by the United Nations as “the glue that holds society together”.

When we formed our new government in 2015, we identified the Ministry of Social Cohesion as having an overarching role in unifying our beloved country. Some of the usual critics and cynics laughed at us.

But here we are, after three years, celebrating Social Cohesion not as a Ministry but as a way of life – our Guyanese way of life. We are here not as an institution but as part of a dynamic process, a national movement that promotes respect for who we are – diverse but proud Guyanese!

Today, when I reflect on one year ago, I stood on this very stage and declared that for me, the social cohesion process “is evolving as more than an approach to development, but as a movement”. I am convinced that I was correct then and, today, my position is unchanged.

The Department is now seen as that arm of Government that is responsible for creating the environment that would encourage the establishment and maintenance of harmony. It is succeeding in its mission; we just have to look around right here in this Cultural Centre. It is a reflection of our richness, our human wealth, our diversity.

Our Observance today is under the theme “Celebrating lasting relationships in a diverse society”. We respected this diversity with prayers representing our religious diversity. We
are all here together as Guyanese nationals, with a unique and distinct personality and identity even as we recognize our cultural mix, our religious preferences, our traditions and customs.

My dearest sisters and brothers, and children: The achievement of cohesion and harmony in Guyana is no longer an unattainable goal, or just a dream or a hope. Bonding is no longer elusive in Guyana as we see daily, and here, Guyanese living and working in unity and co-operation. Yes, we must tell the world that we can coexist peacefully, and together.

The Department of Social Cohesion has had pioneering stewardship of quality, Hon. Minister Amna Ally, the first Minister in the Ministry, had piloted the process of the development of the Five-Year Strategic Plan for Promoting and Enhancing Social Cohesion, from 2017-2021. Hon. George Norton took over at the helm in January 2017, and built on the foundation that was laid, and exactly one year ago, I was privileged to receive from him the Plan at the 2nd annual Social Cohesion Day Observances.

The Social Cohesion Mission is like a mobile bus. It has rolled out to several and all parts of Guyana. In August of 2017, I visited the Rupununi, where the Department had organized an Inter-Village Exchange Programme for 160 young people from 23 communities such as Kaicumbay, Katoka, Quarrie, Shulinab and Moco Moco. I consider that as a remarkable achievement to promote social cohesion both in communities of our indigenous peoples as well as in hinterland areas.

Again, last year, I declared open the Harmony Village in Georgetown, when I became sort-of famous on social media for singing “What a Wonderful World”. I feel like singing that again because the world still remains beautiful! I also took part in Harmony Village in New Amsterdam. I repeat what I said then, that when we can appreciate our differences, we can respect each other and live in harmony.

I miss this year’s Harmony Village which, I understand, was bigger and better. Congratulations Hon. Minister Norton. I believe that the social cohesion process is heading in the right direction.
On behalf of the Government of Guyana, therefore, I want to express thanks and appreciation to all our partners, more especially the UNDP.

I have returned after medical procedures with renewed confidence in my heart that our country can strengthen our national and social cohesion and harmony. We live in an open and free country. We enjoy democracy and the right to pursue freedom in all spheres of our life. We cannot and must not trade this for division, despair or destruction. We have to choose the pathway to live, study, work and play as one, united people, and to prepare ourselves for the bountiful life ahead, so full of promise and prosperity for all of us.

I want you to assure you of the continuing full support of our Government for this movement as you pursue the mission of a socially cohesive Guyana.

We are better and safer together!

I thank you

ENDS