

J.G. Dekker, Caribbean Times, January 2005.

Turnaround.

Education, or the lack thereof, lies at the root of most of Curacao's social, economic problems. For more than twenty-five years, Public Education suffered from severe under financing. Sudden economic down turns drained available funds further and a fatal brain drain started when Shell Oil left the island in the '80s.

In the late '90s, internationally imposed changes in off-shore banking regulations, subsequent indecisiveness and inertia, for over one year, by Dutch socialist junior ministers of finance, Vermeend and Bos, reduced Netherlands Antilles' fiscal income by more than 600 million US dollars and effectively pulled the plug out of the education budget.

Children in schools had no study books, insufficient chairs and tables, no pens, no paper, were housed in buildings in a state of increasingly ill repair, and most of all, had no qualified teaching staff.

Political demagogues, like FOL--- a grass roots socialist party--- party leader, Anthony Godett, promoted Papiamentu, as national language, therewith increasing the isolation of his people from the world and reducing their chances in today's global economy to near zero.

Populist Anthony Godett, a man who did not even make it through tenth grade, wanted even more; total independence, a sovereign independent Republic of Curacao. Anthony, himself the son of a riot leader who burned down part of the old city in a me-too student-like revolution-uproar of the 'late 60s, sought and found support on his side from FOL-party advisor, businessman, ex-con Nelson Monte, and seemingly unlimited financing from drug- and prostitution lords, like Giovanni van Ierland and his gang. A resounding election victory brought him to power in 2003.

Successfully dodging the bullets from the public prosecutor's office, who served subpoena, after subpoena to Anthony and his cronies for fraud, forgery, bribery, money laundering, racketeering and related charges, Anthony put his even lesser educated sister, Myrna on the throne, as Prime Minister, and promoted drug-lord Van Ierland's gang member, Ben Komproe, to Minister of Justice. A full year of obstruction of justice, extensive organized and government sponsored crime, and a wave of armed robbery, murder and drug trafficking plagued the small community.

Except for the Godett family, nobody prospered; investments came to a total halt, the cash of government-owned companies was raided to such extent that only bankruptcy could follow. DCA, the national airline, was the first one to go.

In the end, justice seemed to prevail, convict-Anthony's puppet-government had to yield to a center right businessmen team. More than six months into their job, the outlines of a turnaround are silhouetting at the horizon. The new Prime Minister, Etienne Ys, a very modest little man and tax lawyer by profession, diligently cleaned up the mess left behind by his predecessor.

"The year 2005 will have to produce the moment of truth," Etienne Ys stated stoically in his New Year's speech, putting himself and his cabinet on the line. In the meantime, scores of arrests have been made by a police force, heavily beefed up with assistance from the Hague. A further complete contingent force of over 80 men, and reinforcements for the Coast Guard are expected to arrive in February. Millions additional Euros were released from Kingdom's coffers to fight poverty and investors pledged a few billion dollars to the local economy.

"The future looks bright, and I am very optimistic," said Eduardo Halabi, a 60-year old local developer, born on the island. In the early days, Halabi developed the Marriott hotel (formerly Sonesta) and presently, Eduardo is proposing a new tourist complex next to the Hyatt Hotel development, as well as a new hospital and five more major projects.

International contractor Bechtel, locally managed by Wally Abernathy, is also positive. His group, joint ventured with Changi airport, is working on Hato's new international airport terminal under a long-term self-financing contract.

Mirante, a Atlanta based energy-utility group, works doggedly on improving energy and water supplies with BOA, an energy plant spin-off from the PDVSA oil refinery, and new desalination plants. Former ATT-mobile put in a \$ 50 million mobile cell phone net. At least three new airlines applied for licenses to open additional routes and create new airlift for tourism. Several new hotels are being developed. A dialysis clinic, catering to medical tourism as well as the locals, green house vegetable cultures for local consumption and a state-of-the-art anti-neutrino laboratories of the nuclear physics faculty of the University of Groningen, all hope to open their doors with in the next 6-12 months.

Ys and his team are also proposing a new relationship for the islands to the Netherlands, the Kingdom and Europe as well as an elimination of government layer, the Netherlands Antilles, which presently presides over the five islands. Under that new structure, education could flourish again with funds and brainpower from rejuvenated local businesses, the Kingdom and the European Union.

"Investment in education," stated Ys, "is the only way to continued recovery and future prosperity." We could not agree more!