

Transcripts – Day 1

Day 1 – Monday, 16 November 1964

Members of the Wismar, Christianburg and Mackenzie Commission

1. S. ROOPAN SINGH - Chairman
2. HAROLD A. DRAYTON - Member
3. A.S. MACDONALD - Member
4. SAVITHRI DEVI MOOTOO - Member

Counsels

Sugrim Singh – Counsel for the Commission
John Carter – Counsel for the Demerara Bauxite Company (Demba)
Hugh Shepherd – Counsel for the Police Force and the British Guiana Volunteer Force.

[The Commission convened at 9.00 a.m.]

CHAIRMAN: This opening session of the Commission is now called to order.

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, I wish formally to appear before you as counsel for the Commission.

CARTER: I am watching the interest of the Demerara Bauxite Company, Limited.

SHEPHERD: I am watching the interest of the Police Force and British Guiana Volunteer Force. In the absence of Mr. Gilbert Farnum, I am watching the interest of the British Force. I am here holding his brief and must apologise for his absence. Could I ask that the Commanding Officer of the Volunteer Force and the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Peter Owen, who are present, as it is expected that they will not be required to give statements this week, if they may be released this morning?

CHAIRMAN: Mr. Singh, I have no objection.

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, before I proceed formally to give my opening remarks to this Commission, I would like firstly to state the procedure of the Commission as decided upon, throughout these sittings. I have served copies of this procedure to learned counsels who are here this morning. Briefly, they are as follows:

1. All witnesses' statements and documents to be submitted to Counsel who will present what he deems necessary. Any person or his representative may apply to the Commission if not satisfied with Counsel's decision not to present any evidence offered by that person or persons.
2. Counsel will first examine the witness after which he can be examined by interested parties. Counsel may then re-examine the witness if necessary.
3. The same procedure would be adopted in private sittings.

I do not know if my learned friends would like to add any suggestion to this procedure in order to facilitate these sittings.

CARTER: I have received a copy of the Rules of Procedure. I have nothing to add. It seems to follow not entirely but fairly closely the regular procedures followed in enquiries of this nature.

CHAIRMAN: Mr. Shepherd, have you anything to say?

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SHEPHERD: I have very little to add to what my learned friend Mr. Carter has said. We will attempt to follow these procedures and if we should stumble in any way I hope we should be forgiven. Our aim is to cooperate in every possible way. Different commissions of inquiry proceed in different ways and naturally it will take a little while to understand precisely what is required. Mr. Sugrim Singh has very explicitly indicated the broad procedures to be followed and there may be some little difficulty only in the sense of a time lag in providing copies of the statements of persons referred to by witnesses and, no doubt, Mr. Sugrim Singh will advise the time these statements will be required. So far, as the Volunteer Force is concerned, there is not a large staff but we will do our best to provide you in good time with the statements that are required.

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, I wish to assure my learned friends that they can rely on the utmost cooperation from Counsel of the Commissioners on this question of statements. We now pass on, Members of the Commission, to my opening remarks:

The matters in which you have to enquire are the recent disturbances which took place at Wismar-Christianburg and Mackenzie on and around the 25th May, 1964 – a little over five months ago – when about one hundred and seventy houses were burnt and destroyed, and more than fifteen hundred people became homeless, where there were wide scales of looting, accompanied by arson, rape and murder, unprecedented in the history of British Guiana, with the result that in population of around eighteen thousand persons in that area, no single person of pure East Indian descent can be seen to day – either at Wismar or Mackenzie on the other side of the river, as you yourselves must have observed when you officially visited the area on Friday, the 6th of November last.

Your terms of reference are clearly set out:

1. To inquire into the recent disturbances at Wismar-Christianburg and Mackenzie.
2. To investigate the conduct of the security forces during the said disturbances.
3. To determine the number of deaths and extent of injuries, loss and damage suffered in the said disturbances.
4. And to report thereon.

In keeping with your terms of reference, you will be directing your attention not only to the events prior to the disturbances and during the disturbances, but all events relevant thereto, placing them in their proper contexts, in order to enable you to reach a true finding.

To achieve this objective, you will expect some assistance from me as Counsel to the Commission to place before you witnesses whose evidence will be relevant in accordance with your terms of reference, in order to assist you in your deliberation in arriving at your findings.

To this end, I have obtained statements from a large number of witnesses who actually resided at Wismar and Mackenzie at the relevant period, many of whom have having actually suffered in the said disturbances. In order to obtain evidence from residents who are now scattered all over the Colony, having been forced to abandon their homes, losing all their belongings and are now seeking shelter in various places, an advertisement had to be put in the press asking them to come forward and make statements with a view to giving evidence before you.

This notice in the press and on the radio has not been barren of results, and quite a number of persons possessing valuable information have come forward and will be giving evidence to assist the Commission.

There is also the possibility of public-spirited persons coming forward to give evidence and statements to assist the Commission.

As the Counsel for the Commission – I want to make it very clear from the outset – my function, as I understand it, is not to present a case, much less to prove a case, but simply to collect, collate and place before the Commission all the relevant evidence at my disposal to assist the Commission to arrive at a true finding from the evidence.

Three factors stand out prominently in the favour of the Commission and will in no small way influence your deliberations:

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1. Some of you are either born Guianese or have lived here long enough to appreciate, understand and assess the evidence placed before you, the names of places, rivers and the general geography of the Wismar area and the country as a whole.
2. All of you have lived here during the most important period of our history, and must be presumed to have been following the sequence of events in our political, economic and social revolution.
3. Nearly all of you have visited the Wismar-Mackenzie area and seen the havoc and destruction, and the lay-out of the important buildings and places which will be referred to in the evidence which I propose to place before you.

In my opening remarks I shall refer only to events, persons and organisations which may figure in the inquiry. I shall refrain from expressing any opinion on the issues which fall within the ambit of your jurisdiction, for this would be clearly outside of my function and would constitute a trespass on your domain, thereby usurping your rights. In other words, Members of the Commission, it is my function to assist you, but in assisting you I must avoid any imputation of partiality or expression of any opinion on the issues before you.

I now pass to the background leading to the disturbances at Wismar. At the outset I wish to say that it is an accepted fact **that the disturbances at Wismar around the 25th of May, 1964 were in effect an attack on the Indian section of the population by the Africans in the area who outnumbered the Indians residing there.**

Out of a population of around 18,000 in the Wismar-Mackenzie area, there were only around 2,500 persons of East Indian descent. Many of them owned their own homes and worked with the Demerara Bauxite Company in various departments. Others owned business premises on the Wismar side of the river.

The Demerara Bauxite Company, situated about 65 miles up the Demerara River, employs about 3,500 persons. A few of these live on the Mackenzie side of the river, but the greater number live on the Wismar side of the river, owning their own homes and business places. Many of these homes have been built with interest-free loans from the Company which also has a very wide and efficient service in every field for its employees. The Company was registered in British Guiana in 1916, and since then has made marked and rapid strides over the years, and today contributes around 15 percent of the total revenue and one-third of our income tax.

It has just completed its industrial plant at a cost of around \$65 million, of which amount the sum of nearly \$22 million dollars was spent locally on wages and materials. Bauxite and sugar account for nearly 75 percent of the exports of our country. The Company's operations are located at Mackenzie which takes its name from George Bain Mackenzie, one of the early pioneers in the industry. Government, income tax, royalties, and other payments take around 50 percent of the Company's profits. Guianese find lucrative employment at Mackenzie, and today the Wismar-Mackenzie area is the second most densely populated area in the country.

British Guiana is a land of many races; to be specific the two largest groups by racial origin are those of East Indian and African descent. In British Guiana there are estimated to be about 300,000 East Indians, 204,000 Negroes, and about 120,000 others including Amerindians, Chinese, Whites and Mixed. The East Indians usually marry young according to their personal laws and customs and raise large families. The 1960 census shows that the proportion of the population of East Indian origin had risen to 47 percent, from 44 percent, while the proportion of African origin has fallen to 34 percent from 38 percent. The proportion of Mixed origin has remained at 10 or 11 percent, those of Amerindian origin at 4 percent, European at 3 percent and Chinese at 1 percent.

Africans and East Indians were brought to this country to supply labour and have each made their respective contribution to the development of this country. In the early days they lived like brothers and sisters and shared in each other's joys and sorrows. They respected each other and lived in complete harmony.

Those days are no more. Over the years so many things have crept in the lives of their descendants that the entire peace and harmony which had existed before from one corner of the country to another is today replaced by hatred and anger, disharmony and distrust; and the country is enveloped in a struggle for racial supremacy in every field so deep-rooted that some call for partition.

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Members of the Commission, it is common knowledge that the East Indians and Africans came together as never before in the 1953 elections and swept the polls. Guianese cannot forget the striking scenes of unity and brotherhood between East Indians and Africans in those days. Then something happened. From then onwards this historic get together of the two major races began slowly to fade into oblivion, the gulf between them getting wider and deeper over the past decade, complicating the political atmosphere more and more, and culminating in a situation today when that national spirit has receded into the background. It is the sincere wish of all sane and sober Guianese to have this national spirit revived, and revived very soon, putting an end racial hatred, which like a cancer has eaten away that spirit of brotherhood and harmony – the priceless legacy bequeathed to us by those simple folk who have gone before.

The two outstanding personalities who achieved this unprecedented unity of the East Indians and the Africans in 1953 were Dr. Cheddi Jagan and Mr. Linden Forbes Burnham, Q.C., as Leader and Chairman respectively of the People's Progressive Party, referred to as the P.P.P.

They separated afterwards and then as a result of this fissiparous tendency on both sides, over the years, East Indians in the majority went on the side of Dr. Jagan and his People's Progressive Party and Africans in the majority went on the side of Mr. Forbes Burnham. It is not within my province to discuss the reasons why, but the fact remains that today our country is confronted with serious division which makes the future sad and gloomy unless something quite radical happens in the near future.

In the 1961 elections the P.P.P., which did not contest six seats, polled 93,075 votes or 42 percent of the votes cast. The People's National Congress, the Leader of which Party is Mr. Forbes Burnham, polled 89,501 votes or 40.99 percent of the votes cast. The United Force, of which Mr. Peter D'Aguiar is the leader, polled 16.38 percent of the votes cast. The P.P.P. obtained 20 seats, the P.N.C. 11 seats and the United Force 4 seats. Dr. Jagan, accordingly, formed the Government, but it was argued that if the other two parties had united they would have together obtained 57.37 of the votes and a clear majority.

Coming back to the disturbances at Wismar, racial tension has been since 1953 unnoticed but began to emerge into prominence later. The Kaldor budget, the Labour Relations Bill, and the eighty days' strike which followed, all in their own way increased this racial hatred. There were several racial clashes along with looting, arson and murder, enhancing racial tension all the time.

Then came the Guiana Agricultural Workers' Union strike for recognition in the sugar industry on the 11th February 1964. The sugar industry recognised the Man Power Citizens Association as the bargaining union for sugar workers. This strike, which started at Leonora Estate on the West Coast of Demerara, soon spread all over the Colony, and brought in its train murder, arson rape and violence, particularly at Casbah, De Willem, Annandale and Ann's Grove, culminating in the Wismar tragedy in which over two thousand East Indians had to flee from Wismar, losing all they owned and suffering beatings and indignities unparalleled in the history of this country. Many of them are today bereaved and destitute seeking shelter in various parts of the country.

These defenceless people, all to a man, had to be rescued and removed to the city of Georgetown. Many have witnessed the most gruesome behaviour of their neighbours, and evidence is that the rest of the population in the area stood by and allowed these atrocities to be committed under their very eyes, perhaps afraid to intervene and run the risk of being involved.

SHEPHERD: May I ask to intervene. Mr. Sugrim Singh has referred to burnings and looting. I ask only for guidance as to whether the evidence should not be led of the population standing aside and doing nothing. I understand this is one of the terms of which the members of the Commission will have to decide. I only ask for guidance in this matter because I had in mind throughout that this is one of the questions which the Commission must decide, and here we find that Counsel is sufficiently privileged to represent at the commencement of the inquiry matters which are not supported by evidence as yet. It seems at best premature.

CHAIRMAN: Mr. Shepherd, you can rest assured that the members of this Commission are quite unbiased. It is quite natural that many things have been told to and we have probably read reports in the press, but we can assure you we come here today quite unbiased and without preconceived ideas of what occurred.

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SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, I must apologise to my learned friend if I did not make myself clear; but I had assumed it would be clearly understood that my opening remarks are based on evidence of witnesses, which is in my possession and whom I hope to place before you and who would be giving evidence along these lines.

CARTER: I suggest if Mr. Singh used the term “instructions” rather than “evidence” it would have been more appropriate.

SUGRIM SINGH: Evidence will be placed before you, members of the Commission, of the strength of the Police and Volunteer Force in the area, and the part they played in maintaining law and order during the disturbances. I propose calling the Commissioner of Police and several members of the Police Force and Volunteer Force who were stationed in the area at the time. I propose calling the Minister of Home Affairs during that period under whose portfolio the Police and Volunteer Force fell.

There are maps available to assist you and my learned friends whenever necessary, to appreciate the evidence put forward. I trust that my learned colleagues will not fail to make their contribution throughout the sittings of this Commission to assist you to come to a true finding.

With these opening remarks, members of the Commission, I propose to lead evidence before you and would like to call Mr. Bender, Assistant District Commissioner of the Wismar-Christianburg-Mackenzie area.

MACDONALD: Mr. Chairman, for the purpose of the records, I would like to change the words “the evidence is” to “my instructions”.

SHEPHERD: The British Forces wish to cooperate in any way possible to arrive at the truth of these disorders and related events. They are being represented by Mr. Gilbert Farnum. When he appears tomorrow I will no doubt be able to assist you further. He will no doubt explain further any statements submitted. For the purpose of this opening session of this inquiry the British Forces, however, felt it desirable for three officers to be present, but if they can be released I should be obliged as they have many other urgent matters to deal with. I can, however, assure the Commission that they will be available at short notice if their services are required in the course of the inquiry.

SUGRIM SINGH: Member of the Commission, I am very grateful for the officers of the British Forces to be present here this morning, and I wish to state that at the moment they can be released without affecting the work of the Commission, but I would request them to be at hand so that by telephone call or quick notice they will be here.

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PATRICK ANTHONY BENDER is sworn in, and he states as follows:

SUGRIM SINGH: Your name is Patrick Anthony Bender?

BENDER: My name is Patrick Anthony Bender. Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: You are Assistant District Commissioner of Christianburg. Do Wismar and Mackenzie fall within your jurisdiction?

BENDER: Yes sir. Actually I am Assistant District Commissioner, Upper Demerara River; it is only designated Assistant District Commissioner, Christianburg.

SUGRIM SINGH: Much obliged. Your district extends from Atkinson Field right up to Great Falls in the Demerara River and includes Wismar and Mackenzie. Now you have been stationed in the Christianburg area since when?

BENDER: November, last year.

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SUGRIM SINGH: Since November, 1963 and, except for a few visits to Georgetown, you actually reside there in the Government Compound?

BENDER: I do.

SUGRIM SINGH: I take it now, Mr. Bender, that you are familiar, and must be familiar, with the layout of that district?

BENDER: I am.

SUGRIM SINGH: Are you in a position to tell this Commission roughly what is the total population of the Wismar-Mackenzie-Christianburg area?

BENDER: The total is about eighteen thousand.

SUGRIM SINGH: Of this number, are you in a position to tell this Commission roughly what number of East Indian people were residing in that area?

BENDER: I would say about three thousand.

SUGRIM SINGH: And the balance of fifteen thousand is principally of people of what descent?

BENDER: Principally Africans but there are a few Amerindians.

SUGRIM SINGH: Would you say that the people in the district live in their own homes?

BENDER: Yes, in their own homes, but this is only in respect of the Wismar-Christianburg area.

SUGRIM SINGH: Some of them lived in their own homes. Would you say that others are tenants?

BENDER: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, most of these people work there?

BENDER: With the Demerara Bauxite Company.

SUGRIM SINGH: How do they get to the Demerara Bauxite Company?

BENDER: By small boats. They cross from Wismar to Mackenzie.

SUGRIM SINGH: This crossing from Wismar to Mackenzie is roughly about how many minutes?

BENDER: It takes about two to three minutes as the river at the point of crossing is about quarter mile or so.

SUGRIM SINGH: Have you an idea of the houses built on the Wismar side of the river? Are there any persons owning transported land in that area?

BENDER: Of course, there are persons owning transported land.

SUGRIM SINGH: Are there persons who hold land on the Wismar on lease?

BENDER: I don't know.

SUGRIM SINGH: Is there a local authority?

BENDER: Yes. There is a local authority.

SUGRIM SINGH: Comprising of a Chairman?

BENDER: Yes. A Chairman and nine councillors.

SUGRIM SINGH: Of course, you have an overseer in the office?

BENDER: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: Who is the Chairman of the local authority?

BENDER: Mr. Festus Adams.

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SUGRIM SINGH: And the overseer is?

BENDER: Mr. Allan King.

SUGRIM SINGH: Does the jurisdiction of this local authority extend to Wismar and Christianburg area?

BENDER: Yes, it extends, but the whole of the area is not administered by the local authority. There are certain parts of Wismar and Christianburg which are not included in the local authority.

SUGRIM SINGH: Is there any housing scheme on the Wismar side of the river?

BENDER: Yes, the Government housing scheme run by the Housing Department on the Wismar Hill.

SUGRIM SINGH: And this scheme comprises of how many homes roughly?

BENDER: About two hundred houses roughly.

SUGRIM SINGH: Occupied by East Indians and Africans and other races, or are the majority Africans?

BENDER: The majority of the people in the scheme are Africans.

SUGRIM SINGH: And Mr. Bender, as the Assistant District Commissioner, have you made a survey of caused any survey to be made to determine the actual number of houses destroyed during the disturbances on and around May 25th?

BENDER: No, I did not make a survey but I got a statement from the Police Department.

SUGRIM SINGH: You have that statement in your possession?

BENDER: Yes, I have it.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. Bender, does the statement (1) show the number of houses destroyed; (2) the owners of the houses destroyed?

BENDER: That is right, sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: Does it show the assessed value of the houses destroyed and the market value and the dates the houses were destroyed?

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SHEPHERD: Have you seen the houses destroyed in the various parts of Wismar? Members of the Commission, since this statement was prepared by the Police, I wish to place the record early before the Commission.

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SUGRIM SINGH: Now, Mr. Bender, on the question of houses destroyed, you said earlier that residents hold the land on which some of these houses were as transported land. Can you give this Commission any idea of what has happened to the land on which some of these people were living?

BENDER: The land, I think, is unoccupied.

SUGRIM SINGH: And, of course, Mr. Bender, rates and taxes are charged on these lands?

BENDER: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: Even though the owners may not have the uses for it for some time?

BENDER: That is true, but perhaps I should explain that the local authority has decided at a meeting after the disturbances to waive rates collectible for the balance of the year on all properties which were affected by the disturbances so as to relive those who have to pay taxes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. Bender, are you aware of certain African people actually having built houses on these lands?

BENDER: No, I don't know.

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SUGRIM SINGH: Now among the houses destroyed you will agree with me that some were quite large and costly buildings?

BENDER: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: I do not know if you would venture an opinion as to the rough value of the total property lost in that area, taking into consideration the assessed value of the property which is in the books of the local authority?

BENDER: I have the detailed figures, but they are not here with me. They will be at the office of the local authority, but as far as I can remember the assessed value of property destroyed is in the vicinity of sixty-one thousand dollars.

SUGRIM SINGH: Although the assessed value of the houses destroyed will be over sixty-one thousand dollars, you will agree with me that the assessed value which is mainly for the purpose of taxation is very low indeed?

BENDER: It is quite true that the assessed value is below the market value.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you agree with me that the market value of a property, the assessed value of which is about one thousand dollars, may well be in the area of about ten thousand dollars?

BENDER: Yes, possibly.

SUGRIM SINGH: So, therefore, we can logically come to the conclusion that the assessed value of sixty-one thousand dollars converted into its market value will might very well be six hundred and ten thousand dollars or there about.

BENDER: Yes, I should, however, mention that this assessed valuation of sixty-one thousand dollars is only in respect of about 65 houses in the local authority area, but the destruction of houses extended to thee unorganised areas as well.

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SHEPHERD: If one may try to arrive at the value of the property destroyed, one thousand dollars' assessment value may possibly equal about ten thousand dollars market value, but we can assume that to be a superficial valuation since the actual value may be as little as two thousand dollars. Could more assistance be given to the Commission to enable them to arrive at the true marker value?

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SUGRIM SINGH: I wish to improve your knowledge of the actual figures. I propose as Counsel to the Commission to get these figures from persons familiar with the facts. Members of the Commission, we now see that the figures are naturally in respect of these 65 houses in the local authority area. Do you agree that there were more than 172 houses destroyed in the rest of the area?

BENDER: More than two hundred and fifteen houses.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, before I leave this point, Mr. Bender, apart from the local authority's move to afford relief to the land owners from payment of rates and taxes of those lands which are affected, —are you aware of any other move of the local authority to encourage the persons who have had against their will to leave Wismar to go back to Wismar?

BENDER: No, I don't know.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, let us for a moment deal with the security forces on and around 25th May. How strong was the Police Force at Wismar?

BENDER: This is the information I got from the Police. The strength of the Police comprised of thirteen; that is, eleven constables and two subordinate officers. When, however, the disturbances started, there were only ten, that is, eight constables and two subordinate officers. Three were transferred to other areas where there were disturbances.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now what about the Volunteer Force?

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BENDER: I don't know the strength of the Volunteer Force.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, Mr. Bender, while the headquarters were at Mackenzie, members of the Volunteer Force operated in the Wismar area?

BENDER: Wismar area does form part of the entire district.

SHEPHERD: The British Guiana Volunteer Force is a national armed force with headquarters in Georgetown. Whenever any situation in a district was considered serious the Volunteer Force in that district is embodied on instructions from the officer commanding the British Guiana Volunteer Force in Georgetown.

SUGRIM SINGH: I appreciate my learned friend's explanation. Now, there is a Police station at Wismar and another Police station at Mackenzie. Would you explain the relationship between these two stations, and could you give the strength of the Mackenzie Force?

BENDER: I don't know.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. Bender, as to the disturbances of the 25th of May, I take it that you were aware of the tension that was building up before?

BENDER: Well, I know just a day or two before that there was tension growing.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, did you observe or hear a day or two before the 25th of any happenings or cases of fire?

BENDER: No, I did not.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. Bender, when was the first time you saw anything?

BENDER: On the evening of the 24th May I saw fire in the Wismar area.

SUGRIM SINGH: Where did you observe it? In the One Mile area?

BENDER: Yes, it was in the One Mile area.

SUGRIM SINGH: Can you recall roughly on the 24th May, 1964, how many fires you saw?

BENDER: I saw two fires.

SUGRIM SINGH: Was there any fire fighting apparatus in the Wismar area?

BENDER: There is no fire fighting unit. I should mention that there was a unit given to the local authority by Demba, but it has not been in use for three years.

SUGRIM SINGH: It was very generous of Demba. Did you, after seeing those fires, leave your home on Sunday evening?

BENDER: No sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you make any enquiries from the Police of Wismar?

BENDER: I did phone the S.O., Sergeant Chalmers, and asked him if he heard about the fires. He told me yes, and that the patrols were covering the area.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you in the first place see any unruly crowds in the area?

BENDER: I did not see any crowd. When I spoke to Sergeant Chalmers he told me about the growing tension and crowds moving about.

SUGRIM SINGH: Let us move on to Monday. Can you give us briefly what happened on Monday, 25th?

BENDER: On Monday there was rioting in the area.

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SUGRIM SINGH: Did you see any houses on fire?

BENDER: Yes, I saw a few houses on fire that day. I remember I was at the Christianburg Rest House when I heard that teachers and children at the Christianburg Government School were being attacked by a crowd. So I went over to the school, but when I arrived the crowd had dispersed.

SUGRIM SINGH: Is it true that there were thirty-two teachers, three of whom were of Indian descent?

BENDER: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Is it true that twenty nine Negro teachers had left the school and that the three Indians were left in the building?

BENDER: There were also teachers remaining who were of Negro descent.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you remember, Mr. Bender, the East Indian teachers asking the Sanitary Inspector who lives nearby to shelter there?

BENDER: I was told so.

SUGRIM SINGH: Are you aware that the request was refused?

BENDER: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did they request any help from you?

BENDER: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: Was there any complaint, report or request made to you on the 25th May, for assistance?

BENDER: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Apart from the teachers?

BENDER: Apart from the teachers? No.

SUGRIM SINGH: When was the first time you left your compound to visit the areas where the houses were destroyed?

BENDER: I think it was the Tuesday or Wednesday following the disturbances.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you go down to the Wismar area at all on the Monday, 25th?

BENDER: I did not. I kept between the rest house and my office.

SUGRIM SINGH: Why did you not go down to Wismar?

BENDER: I was afraid. I knew there was a riot and I instructed that my launch and crew stand by in case the crowd came my way and I had to escape.

SUGRIM SINGH: But why did you not go down to Wismar?

BENDER: I was afraid I would be beaten.

SUGRIM SINGH: But did you not know that only Indians were being attacked?

BENDER: That was what was going around.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did it occur to you at anytime on Monday, 25th, that you could have sought the assistance of the Police at Wismar to provide you with protection in order to see what you could have done?

BENDER: I tried to get the Police but I could not get in touch with them.

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SUGRIM SINGH: You said that you did not get in touch with the Police for the whole of the 25th. How did you get the impression that their hands were filled? Mr. Bender, do you agree with me that in the decentralisation of Authority you were a responsible officer?

BENDER: I agree.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you have the Queen's flag flying over your compound?

BENDER: Yes, but it has been taken down.

SUGRIM SINGH: Can you tell me that the flag was put nowhere else but the District Commissioner's Compound because, in effect, you were looked upon as the Queen's representative on the spot?

BENDER: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: And as such, the maintenance of law and order and the Police did *de jure* fall under your jurisdiction?

BENDER: I do not understand *de jure*.

SUGRIM SINGH: In other words, as the Queen's representative do you have some authority for making suggestions for the preservation of law and order in that district?

BENDER: I was assisting in that area.

SUGRIM SINGH: And your words are highly respected by the Police in any suggestion relating to the upholding that law and order, and yet you confined yourself to your compound on that day?

BENDER: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Prior to 25th May, 1964, you having been there since November last year, do you recall any racial or other disturbances in Wismar?

BENDER: No, I don't recall any.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you agree with me that the residents in that area, Indians and Africans, lived in complete harmony up to around the 25th May?

BENDER: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you agree with me, Mr. Bender, that in the social field – I am talking about clubs, debating societies and other social amenities in the district – Indians and Africans were together? Could you of your own knowledge living in that district at the time give this Commission any reasons in the light of the background you have admitted of complete harmony, any reason for this sudden outbreak of violence, Africans attacking Indians on the 25th May?

BENDER: It was surprising to me.

SUGRIM SINGH: My instructions are that there was an allegation of an adult Indian kicking a Negro boy. Did you hear of this?

BENDER: Yes I heard.

SUGRIM SINGH: And my instructions are that this touched off the occurrence of the 25th May. Do you agree with this?

BENDER: Yes, I heard so.

SUGRIM SINGH: Again, I promise not to ask you what you heard. Now, let us come back. Mr. Bender, is it within your knowledge that it is usual for the Mackenzie area to be visited by ex-convicts and people of questionable reputation?

BENDER: Yes.

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SUGRIM SINGH: Do you remember seeing any outstanding criminals on the relevant date, May 25th, 1964?

BENDER: Yes, I had heard there was an abnormal influx.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. Bender, do you remember seeing strange faces from Georgetown? Crowds of young men, strangers in the district in white shirts and dark trousers?

BENDER: I heard about this.

SUGRIM SINGH: Are you aware of the fact that bombs were used in the destruction of houses?

BENDER: There were loud explosions.

SUGRIM SINGH: Are you aware, Mr. Bender, of men, women and children seeking shelter and this request was refused by their immediate neighbours of African descent? In a population of eighteen thousand people, two thousand were attacked by a comparatively speaking small crowd of unruly people? Are you aware of any efforts by the rest of the population in that area to intervene to avert this catastrophe?

BENDER: No.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. Bender, are you aware of any effort by the local authority, the Churches and prominent individuals in that area to intervene to avert the atrocities at Wismar?

BENDER: No.

SUGRIM SINGH: I am sure you will unhesitatingly agree with me that had the other fifteen thousand people intervened they would have averted this happening?

BENDER: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Are you aware of any shots fired by the Police or Volunteers during the disturbances on 25th May? You do know that the Police and members of the Volunteer Force were armed? Are you aware of an attempt to bomb the Indians who were actually crowded at the station, brought there for rescue? Are you aware of some persons other than a member of the Police Force or a member of the Volunteer Force firing a shot on the group that were trying to bomb the East Indians at the Police station?

BENDER: No.

—

CARTER: I understand that this witness is stationed at Christianburg, and as Christianburg is about one mile away from the station, I can't see how it would have been possible for him to see or hear any shots. I don't know what my friend's instructions are, but he may enlighten us with the facts.

—

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, I gather from him that he visited the area on Tuesday or Wednesday, in which case he was not able to take part in rescue operations, apart from rescuing Indian teachers.

BENDER: Apart from rescuing the Indian teachers I didn't take a part in any other way.

SUGRIM SINGH: My last question. Prior to the 25th May, did you know of any political meeting being held in your district, by any particular political party a week or so before?

BENDER: I am not aware of any.

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, that is all from me. Sir, I don't know if it is convenient for my friends if they propose to cross-examine this witness – perhaps to get rid of this witness this morning.

—

SHEPHERD: My cross examination will only take about half an hour.

Transcripts – Day 1

—

CARTER: I do not propose to cross-examine this witness.

—

SHEPHERD: When were you appointed as Assistant District Commissioner in that area?

BENDER: November last year.

SHEPHERD: The Commission is investigating principally what happened on 25th May, 1964; that was five months later. You have been in office five months before the disturbances. Now, your district extends from Christianburg to Wismar. Your district office is in Wismar or Christianburg?

BENDER: Christianburg.

SHEPHERD: Most of the incidents to which you have referred occurred in Wismar. Wismar is at least about a mile from Christianburg. And Wismar and Christianburg are on the left bank of the Demerara River. And most of the population of that area live in Wismar and Christianburg area. The river is quite wide and the population altogether in Wismar and Christianburg area is about twenty thousand. You are Commissioner for the whole area, not only Wismar and Christianburg. Your district therefore covers a wide area, sparsely populated, besides Wismar and Christianburg. You have said the outbreak took you completely by surprise. Is that so?

BENDER: Yes.

SHEPHERD: Thank you.

—

ALLAN KING is sworn in and he states as follows:

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. King, you are the overseer of the Wismar-Christianburg Local Authority, and your name is Allan King?

KING: Yes, Allan King.

SUGRIM SINGH: And you live in the district at what address?

KING: Lot 22, Section C, Christianburg.

SUGRIM SINGH: And you have residing in that district for how long?

KING: For the past fourteen years.

SUGRIM SINGH: And you have been overseer for the local authority for how many years?

KING: From 1957.

SUGRIM SINGH: I take it that you are connected with the churches and other amenities offered in the district such as clubs and games and things like that.

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: With that background, Mr. King, would you agree with me that Indians and Africans were living in complete harmony up to the 25th May, 1964.

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: And socially they more or less mixed together.

KING: Yes

SUGRIM SINGH: You are aware that there are branches of the main political parties in that district.

KING: Yes.

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SUGRIM SINGH: All parties particularly the P.P.P. and P.N.C., and perhaps the United Force?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: You also are aware that these three respective branches at different times held meetings in different parts of Wismar?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: And you will agree with me also that these meetings never caused any disruption in the friendly relations between Africans and Indians at Wismar?

KING: Not really.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, when first did you observe that there was a possibility of an outbreak of violence in that area.

KING: It was on Monday, 25th May.

SUGRIM SINGH: On the morning of the 25th you said violence was impending. What caused you to think so?

KING: Because there was burning of a shop. Dilapana shop.

SUGRIM SINGH: That was about what o'clock?

KING: Sunday night.

SUGRIM SINGH: Oh, that was Sunday night?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: You said the burning took place on Sunday night. You don't know the time?

KING: No.

SUGRIM SINGH: When you got up on Monday morning what did you observe?

KING: On Monday at my office I heard of bombings.

SUGRIM SINGH: After that, what did you hear or what did you see?

KING: I heard alarms of fire.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you look out?

KING: Yes, I saw fire in the district.

SUGRIM SINGH: What time did you finish your work?

KING: About 11.30.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you go down to the vicinity, lower down the market?

KING: After lunch.

SUGRIM SINGH: And then where?

KING: To the post office,

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you talk to the Police or any other person?

KING: No, I never spoke to anyone.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you see your Chairman, Mr. Festus Adams?

KING: No, not until late in the afternoon.

Transcripts – Day 1

SUGRIM SINGH: Now on your way to the post office did you actually see any unruly crowds along the road adjoining the river?

KING: I saw a crowd on the hill.

SUGRIM SINGH: That crowd consisted of about how many people?

KING: Roughly one hundred and fifty to two hundred people.

SUGRIM SINGH: Were you at the post office when the crowd came later on?

KING: No, I left there and went back to my office.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you ever come out of your office for the balance of the afternoon?

KING: Yes, about 4.30.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you see any unruly crowds again on the road?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Was the crowd all over the place moving backwards and forwards?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, what I am getting at, Mr. King, did you know of any effort by the village council of which you are overseer, councillor representatives or social groups to intervene and to stop this unruly crowd of two hundred people? Just a minute, I am not trying to mislead you. Did you personally try to speak to any people in these unruly crowds?

KING: I never ventured.

SUGRIM SINGH: How long did you spend at the post office?

KING: About fifteen minutes.

SUGRIM SINGH: The post office is how far from the Police station?

KING: About an eighth of a mile.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you witness any looting, arson, beating or murder?

KING: No.

SUGRIM SINGH: You were on the road twice – midday and afternoon – and you did not hear of any looting, murder or rape?

KING: I heard of lootings, burning and rape.

SUGRIM SINGH: But not of murder?

KING: No.

SUGRIM SINGH: Unto now you haven't heard of murder?

KING: Yes. Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you hear that the entire Indian population had moved out of the area and then taken to Mackenzie?

KING: I heard that they were at the Police station.

SUGRIM SINGH: That is what I am asking? Did you hear that the entire Indian population had moved out of Wismar end taken over to Mackenzie and then to Georgetown?

KING: Yes.

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SUGRIM SINGH: Why are you hesitating? My questions are very clear. And there was murder, rape, violence everywhere and you happened to be on the road at the time and you did not see anything? And you were on the road at eleven o'clock and four o'clock and you did not see anything? Did you go by helicopter, walking or bicycle?

KING: I was riding.

SUGRIM SINGH: And you rode right down to Wismar from Christianburg and you didn't see anything?

KING: No.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now tell us the two hundred and fifteen houses destroyed. How many were there within the village district?

KING: From records of the local authority sixty-five houses were destroyed by fire.

SUGRIM SINGH: All of the sixty-five belonged to Indians?

KING: Three were Africans and sixty-two were Indians.

SUGRIM SINGH: Were those three houses burnt as a result of being too close to those of the Indians?

KING: I believe so.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. King, you are the overseer of the district. What do you mean by saying, "I believe so"? Were they near or not? You know or you don't know? Now these houses owned by Africans were near to the houses of the Indians whose houses were burnt?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now can you give me the total assessed value of the sixty-two houses belonging to Indians which had been destroyed?

KING: I would say about sixty-five thousand dollars.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you agree with the assessed value is usually very low for the purpose of taxation. In other words the landlords would try their best to reduce the assessed value so that when the rates and taxes are levied they would pay less?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, I want you to give me your opinion, because there are exceptions in the rule. Some houses may value twice, thrice, some may be ten times, some may even be twelve times the assessed value according to the current market price. But would you not fix the market price of the houses on the conservative, not the liberal side, to be about twice, thrice or four times the assessed value?

KING: Thrice.

SUGRIM SINGH: So then the market value on the average of the sixty-two houses destroyed by fire would be approximately one hundred and ninety-five thousand dollars – three times what the figure you gave. Right?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, on these facts where these houses were burnt, the title to the land is in whose names?

KING: Some were on leased land and some are transported land.

SUGRIM SINGH: Leased from the Demerara Bauxite Company?

KING: No. Leased from private landlords who have transports.

SUGRIM SINGH: Oh, well, let no put it this way – all the lands are transported lands?

KING: Yes.

Transcripts – Day 1

SUGRIM SINGH: Well, I will accept that answer. All the lands on which these sixty-two houses were built are transported lands. Right? Lands owned by transport, the legal title being in the hands of the transportee. Now, are you aware that on some of these lands there are houses and shacks which have been put up by people and these are now occupied? You are not aware of that?

KING: No.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. King, let us go back to this housing business. Do you know if some of these buildings were insured against civil commotion or riot?

KING: I do not know.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, let me ask you in the background of what you have answered in the affirmative that there was complete harmony between these two races.

—

CARTER: May I enquire whether this Commission has limited itself to the loss suffered by Indians in this area? I ask this question because Mr. Sugrim Singh pointed out that there is evidence through this witness that sixty five houses were set on fire, in and around the local authority, three owned by Africans and sixty-two by Indians. Are we limiting our inquiry only to the loss of the Indian houses?

—

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, my friend is anticipating me. I intended to come to that later on. I was dealing with Indians, but actually Negroes were beaten and had their houses destroyed.

—

CARTER: You are dealing with the assessed value of the houses, but only in respect of sixty-two houses.

—

SUGRIM SINGH: Let me relieve my friend's anxiety by asking that question right away. You said there were three houses belonging to Africans which were destroyed.

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Can you give me the assessed value of these houses?

KING: (1) Seven thousand dollars; (2) eight hundred dollars; and (3) six hundred and fifty dollars.

SUGRIM SINGH: And these amount to eight thousand four hundred and fifty dollars? And the same rule applies – three times would be the market price. Right?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: I was asking you just now – are you aware whether these houses were insured against civil commotion and riots?

KING: I do not know.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now to get back to our point. There was complete harmony according to you to the 25th.

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, you live in the area. There would be several things of which you would be aware more than any outsider. Can you give or think of any reason for this sudden outbreak of violence on the Monday morning?

KING: I can't understand that at all.

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SUGRIM SINGH: All right. Can you, Mr. King, tell this Commission why was it that in a population of eighteen thousand, two thousand were attacked and sixteen thousand stayed aloof without intervening? Can you give any reason?

KING: No, I cannot give any reason.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, you will agree with me that in normal everyday life if you are present when a man attacks another you would intervene spontaneously? Couldn't you intervene and talk peace? But if the man has dangerous weapons you would not run the risk of involving yourself. But normally you cannot think of any reason why sixteen thousand people remained aloof and afraid to intervene? Now my first question: do you know, Mr. King, as a responsible officer in that district, that Africans neighbours to the Indians who were beaten, looted and subjected to violence, refused to shelter these Indians when they walked and asked for help? Do you know of that?

KING: I heard of that.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you know as a fact after the Wismar incident and the wholesale transportation of Indian residents of Wismar to Georgetown, on the Mackenzie side there were still about one hundred and thirty Indians left working for the Company?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: And do you know as a fact that immediately after the "Sun Chapman" exploded on the 6th of July, approximately two months from the Wismar disturbances, there was another sudden eruption on the Mackenzie side when five Indians were murdered? Do you know of that?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: And when every single Indian person had to vacate the Mackenzie side? You know of that?

KING: I heard so.

SUGRIM SINGH: And do you know that all the Indian houses in Kara Kara – you know the area – were burnt? Right?

KING: That is outside my area.

SUGRIM SINGH: You never checked or heard? It is just across the river!

KING: I never.

SUGRIM SINGH: That is all from me.

SHEPHERD: Sir, you have lived in this area for fourteen years?

KING: Yes.

SHEPHERD: You know many people in the area?

KING: Well, I know many people.

SHEPHERD: You know most of the houses? It is part of your job?

KING: Yes.

SHEPHERD: Those people I suppose use kerosene and gasoline in their homes? Do they store any?

KING: For cooking.

SHEPHERD: Do they use kerosene for lighting purposes as well? I imagine that such homes would have a little stored away.

KING: Yes.

SHEPHERD: How much kerosene or gasoline would have been used in one of these homes?

Transcripts – Day 1

I could not give an inventory of how much.

SHEPHERD: Mr. King, I take it that you have prepared a document for the Commission in respect of the assessed value of the properties destroyed in your local authority?

KING: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: May I have a look at that document? May I ask you one question, Mr. King? Did you observe any strange groups of people, of young men dressed in white shirts and black trousers in that area just before the 25th?

KING: I did not see any particular people.

SUGRIM SINGH: That is all.

SHEPHERD: How far apart were these houses?

KING: The houses were about 10 to 12 feet apart.

SHEPHERD: You know the houses. Most of them are of timber, I suppose, set on stilts.

KING: Yes. Most are of timber. Some are on stilts and some are on concrete blocks.

SHEPHERD: Would you agree with me, Mr. King, all the materials are at hand for a campaign of arson – rather crowded wooden homes, stocks of gasoline, kerosene, and so on. Now, you would agree that the Police had an extremely difficult time with fires all round and people milling around in the streets.

KING: It must have been a difficult time.

SHEPHERD: Then you feel the Police did as well as it was possible for them to do?

KING: Yes.

SHEPHERD: And they did a very good job in rescuing as many people as they did?

KING: Yes.

SHEPHERD: You agree their best choice was to save life rather than property?

KING: I do agree.

SHEPHERD: Then you agree that in the light of the violence on that day, from the number of casualties the security forces did very well indeed.

KING: Yes.

SHEPHERD: Mr. King, would you have every expected the intensity of violence on that day?

KING: No. Never.

SHEPHERD: And do you agree that the affair at Wismar was a matter of revenge for the occurrences on the West Coast and East Coast of Demerara?

KING: No. I can't say if this is so.

SHEPHERD: You do remember that some six weeks alter the launch "Sun Chapman" blew up on the Demerara River and the bodies were brought to Wismar. They included, I suppose, Africans, East Indians and, possibly, other races.

KING: They were all Africans.

SHEPHERD: They were all Africans. That is all, Mr. King.

DRAYTON: You say you did not witness any looting or beating or arson, murder or rape?

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KING: No sir.

DRAYTON: But you also said you observed crowds all over the place moving backward and forward. What were they doing?

KING: Moving backward and forward.

DRAYTON: You also said, Mr. King, you saw fires all around.

KING: Yes

DRAYTON: But you did not actually witness any being set?

KING: No.

DRAYTON: Was there any build up to the disturbance?

KING: I would not say so. There was the usual talk of which I took no notice.

DRAYTON: Mr. King, didn't you ask any questions at all?

KING: No, I didn't ask any questions.

DRAYTON: After seeing about two hundred people on the street, wasn't your natural curiosity as a human being aroused to ask what was going on?

KING: I thought it wasn't in my place, so I didn't ask.

DRAYTON: Didn't you ask why the fires were blazing?

KING: No.

DRAYTON: But aren't you a natural human being. You didn't ask anything at all?

King: No.

DRAYTON: That is all.

MRS. JANET JAGAN is sworn in and she states as follows:

SUGRIM SINGH: Mrs. Janet Jagan you live where?

JANET JAGAN: 65 High Street, Georgetown.

SUGRIM SINGH: Around the 25th May, 1964, you were Minister of Home Affairs.

JANET JAGAN: Yes, I was.

SUGRIM SINGH: You were appointed on the 15th June, 1963 to this post.

JANET JAGAN: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: And you resigned on the 1st June, 1964.

JANET JAGAN: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Apart from being Minister of Home Affairs, you are an official of the political party known as the P.P.P.

JANET JAGAN: Yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: You are the Secretary?

JANET JAGAN: Yes. General Secretary.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, as Minister of Home Affairs is it correct to say that the maintenance of public safety and public order and Police Department were within your portfolio?

JANET JAGAN: Yes.

Transcripts – Day 1

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, a word about the internal procedures and systems whereby you were kept informed of important developments in the country. How did it work?

JANET JAGAN: Well.

SUGRIM SINGH: Let us take, for example, something outstanding, not a day to day business – something outstanding of public interest; some disorder occurs in some part of this country. What was the procedure to get this down to you?

JANET JAGAN: Well, actually Security Forces and the Security Branch submitted daily reports, but I am saying that these reports were usually late, and most of the information I gathered from reading the morning papers. I had cause to complain several times to the Commissioner of Police, that information about was taking place in the country generally came from the newspapers. Further information I got from people who used to call me up and tell me, and from my own private sources of information.

SUGRIM SINGH: As a result of these complaints the Commissioner of Police agreed to telephone you daily one keep you apprised of important developments?

JANET JAGAN: Yes, or probably written reports.

SUGRIM SINGH: That followed later. How did this system of communication fit with your work? Was it satisfactory?

JANET JAGAN: Well, not entirely. I had to telephone the Commissioner of Police frequently, and ask him what was taking place. Quite recently I hadn't been able to reach the Commissioner of Police by telephone.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, Mrs. Jagan, let us advert to the Wismar tragedy. When you resigned you made a statement in the Senate.

JANET JAGAN: Yes.

[One typewritten page with about six questions and answers is missing here. This page also includes the introduction of the objection raised by Shepherd, Counsel for the Police, to the tendering of Mrs. Jagan's resignation statement to the Commission, particularly the sections where Mrs. Jagan stated that people were murdered at Wismar.]

SHEPHERD: Mrs. Jagan made a statement to the Senate at the time of her resignation. Is that relevant to the inquiry? I don't think it is. As Minister of Home Affairs this is a statement she made in the Senate but she can't verify the truth of her statements. There is no evidence to satisfy you that these things happened. My submission is that it is wrong to tender this document at this early stage of the inquiry entering prejudicial statement by an ex-Minister as to the matter under inquiry.

—
SUGRIM SINGH: Mrs. Jagan, I will ask you to come back tomorrow morning.

(The session adjourned at this time)