

# Caricom foreign ministers agree on common approach

CARIBBEAN Community (Caricom) foreign ministers have agreed in principle to take a uniform approach to important extra-regional foreign policy matters, says Jamaica government minister Seymour Mullings.

Mullings, who is chairman of the Standing Committee of Ministers Responsible for Foreign Affairs (SCMFA), said the decision was taken at its just-ended meeting here on Wednesday.

He said the ministers agreed at their twenty-third meeting that there was need to meet more regularly and urgently to map out united foreign policies on specific trade, economic and other issues with international partners.

The issue of a common foreign policy approach first surfaced last year when a number of Caribbean countries, including Jamaica, decided to individually negotiate the so-called Shiprider agreement with the United States in the fight against trafficking in illegal drugs.

Barbados and Jamaica held out for an improved agreement, while other Caribbean countries signed an early accord, allowing United States agencies access to national waters and airspace in pursuit of suspect traffickers.

Although the Treaty of Chaguanas does not oblige member countries to develop joint positions on all issues, Mullings pointed to a common approach to stamp out the smuggling of arms into the region as an example of co-ordinat-

ed foreign policy in Caricom.

He said there was need for a united strategy on matters such as a proposed hemispheric trading bloc—the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) by the year 2000—and a successor agreement to the Lome IV agreement which would impact on the Caribbean's banana, rice and rum exports to Europe.

A communique issued at the end of the conference also said the foreign ministers have agreed on the need for a massive region-wide public awareness campaign about the regional integration movement.

"They agreed that the secretariat, in conjunction with the Government Information Services of member states should launch a public relations and education drive throughout 1998 to increase public awareness of the Caribbean Community," the 21-page document stated.

The agreement also includes a role for embassies, high commissions and consuls of Caricom member states to, "inform the diaspora and other persons abroad about Caricom".

Speaking with reporters, Guyana's Foreign Minister Clement Rohee chided the media and social commentators for contributing to "some negativism" about the 14-nation grouping instead of assisting in the building of partnerships with social partners and non-governmental organisations.

—Cana Georgetown