CHAPTER VII

Return to the patron-client relationship

The Netherlands and Suriname agree to disagree (Pronk, following an orientation visit to Paramaribo in July 1990 aimed at re-establishing financial assistance, *NRC Handelsblad*, 26-7-1990:3).

Following the elections of 25 November 1987 the efforts of civilian politicians to regain control in Suriname and re-establish democratic rule were hampered as the inauguration of the new Shankar government signalled a return to *apanjahtism* (see Chapter I). Thus, Surinamese politics just threatened to continue where it had been so violently interrupted in February 1980, with the important difference that this time the military played a profound role in determining domestic affairs. The officers’ persistent involvement in political matters, along with human rights abuses, the ongoing civil war and drug trafficking, inexorably generated serious tensions between the Front and the NL, while also having severe repercussions on the Republic’s external standing. With the exception of some regional countries and organizations, most nations and international financial institutions cast a disapproving eye on developments in Suriname and, consequently, refused to provide any meaningful aid which would assist the civilian politicians in changing Suriname’s economic fortune.

Paramount in this was the Dutch decision to transfer no more than a portion of the outstanding funds under the Aid Treaty, which greatly angered the Shankar government. The Hague’s refusal to accept the NL’s autonomous position and the direct pressure on Paramaribo to curb Bouterse’s influence, gave rise to new diplomatic tensions between the Netherlands and Suriname. Unable to solve these transatlantic disagreements, the Shankar government came under additional domestic pressure as the Dutch refusal to honour the Aid Treaty had severe consequences for the socio-economic situation and hence for the Republic’s political stability. Confronted with the Front’s failure to solve these problems, the military once more staged a coup, on Christmas Eve 1990.
Despite the victory of civilian politicians in the November 1987 elections and the army’s withdrawal to the barracks, the internal and external structure of the Republic remained fragile. One reason for this domestic fragility was that the election results reflected, as stated, a return to *apanjahtism*. Most noticeably, the politicians now taking over from the officers were the same ethnic leaders removed by the military in the beginning of 1980. The upshot was the emergence of a political situation all too similar to that of the pre-Bouterse era, aptly described by Brana-Shute (1990:201) as ‘back to the future’.

Proof that such an evaluation of the post-1987 period was justified becomes glaringly obvious when taking a closer look at the composition of the new cabinet. In the interests of the largest ethnic communities, former NPS Prime Minister Arron was elected Vice-President (thus ignoring the unimpressive record of his post-independence cabinet) and KTPI chairman Soemita (despite his conviction for corruption in the first Arron cabinet) became Minister of Social Affairs as well as Deputy Vice-President. VHP leader Lachmon, who had been expected to take the position of the Assembly’s President, chose instead to become Speaker of the new Parliament; the presidency went to his party colleague Ramsewak Shankar (Thorndike 1990:53; Dew 1994:163). The remaining cabinet posts were divided according to the strength of each party, with Edwin Sedoc (NPS) being appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs (Schalwijc 1994:114).

After its inauguration on 25 January 1988 the Shankar cabinet received the Assembly’s unanimous support, including that of the NDP. Considering that the new Front government had failed to honour the Leonsberg Agreement – according to which Essed (NPS) and Wijdenbosch (NDP) would share power as President and Vice-President respectively and a State Council would be formed (assuming the functions of the Supreme Council) – Bouterse and his colleagues felt cheated and consequently, as Dew (1994:163-4) observed, ‘the NDP and the military prepared for battle’.

In other words, besides the return to *apanjahtism*, the unpredictable attitude of the officers towards their new civilian rulers did little to improve the Republic’s political stability. Leading magazines such as *The Economist* (5-12-1987:47) questioned: ‘Will Surinam’s winner win?’ while *The New York Times* (13-1-1988:A13) quoted diplomats stating: ‘There won’t be a complete overhaul of the political structures overnight. [...] The military will have a diminished role, but it will still be part of a picture, at least initially’. Likewise Brana-Shute (1990:201) warned that ‘the examples of other military regimes in Latin America and Africa have informed us that the military does not surrender power quickly or easily’.

Indeed, Bouterse lost no time in contributing to this political uncertainty as...
he repeatedly criticized the government. One of his sharpest warnings came as the cabinet attempted to limit the constitutional position of the officers. The Lieutenant Colonel not only rejected the proposed restrictions, he also threatened the cabinet with unspecified actions:

This government has failed very badly, particularly when looking at the state of the armed forces. Perhaps not the whole government, but in its ranks there are at least some habitual opponents of the army who openly, in a very reprehensible and demonstrative manner, relate that they want to finish with the army. We play it cool. We definitely won’t be led to the slaughter by twaddle, no way. We respect democracy and maintain order in the country. But when they touch us physically, the situation will of course become very difficult. (Bouterse 1990:176.)

Besides these rather blatant threats, the military also made use of its legal powers to influence domestic developments. In particular following the NDP’s disastrous election results, the Military Council emerged as a primary tool to ‘guide’ the Republic. The Council, formed on 4 December 1987, consisted of many familiar faces, including Bouterse, Sital, Mijnals and Graanoogst to represent the army’s interests (Caribbean Insight 11-1(1988):15). In view of this body’s composition and its broadly defined powers, Thorndike (1990:53) commented: ‘Fears that the military council would frustrate the civilian government were to an extent justified.’

In fact, the Council’s first action entailed criticizing the government government’s proposal to honour the victims of the December Murders in an annual public ceremony. Instead, the officers held a military parade to acclaim the ‘genuine national heroes’ (referring to the executioners, not their murdered opponents) on 8 December (Caribbean Insight 11-1(1988):15). Similarly, when in January 1988 The Hague offered Shankar to mediate in the civil war, the Military Council once more demonstrated its influence by bluntly rejecting this proposal. According to Bouterse: ‘There is nothing to mediate. Nowhere in the world does one negotiate with terrorists and this will thus also not happen in Suriname’ (Haagsche Courant, 14-1-1988:3).

The position of the army was strengthened by the ‘advisory’ nature of the State Council. Since the new Constitution did not specify the Council’s exact composition, Shankar attempted to minimize the officers’ influence by excluding them as much as possible, which, however, led to widespread disagreement between the various interest groups. The result was a lengthy formation process, lasting until early 1989; more than a year after the elections. When the Council was summoned for its first meeting, it consisted of three representatives from both the VHP and the NPS, two from the KTPI, two from the trade unions, as well as one delegate each from Pendawa Lima, the NDP and the employers’ organizations. The NL too, was represented by only one officer. Bouterse’s nomination of Sital, however, was generally perceived as ‘a
move calculated to cause maximum consternation to the centre-right civilians’ (Thorndike 1990:53-4).

Besides political confrontations with the NDP and the military, the new government was facing other serious problems. First of all, Suriname’s deteriorating economic state had to be urgently addressed. Consequently, this was one of the leading themes in Shankar’s official address to parliament on 11 March 1988 (Sedoc-Dahlberg 1990:186). The other important issue was the ongoing violent conflict between the military and the SNLA, despite Suriname’s redemocratization. Shortly before the inauguration of the Front cabinet, it became public that on New Year’s Day 1988 a group of civilians had been killed by the NL near the village of Pokigron.¹ A few days later Wako presented further allegations of human rights abuses perpetrated by the NL. Between June and August 1986 alone, the UN Special Rapporteur estimated that the army had killed around 200 civilians, which threw a dark shadow over the new civilian government.²

Dutch-Surinamese rapprochement

Whereas peace between the NL and SNLA and stable relations between the government and the military were regarded as long-term goals, it was Paramaribo’s hope that at least the pressing socio-economic difficulties could be tackled in the near future once Dutch funds began to flow again. The anticipation of the outstanding N£ 1.4 billion led to great expectations among Suriname’s political and business circles as a fortnight after the November elections Van den Broek announced that The Hague would not impose new conditions on granting financial assistance. He rejected concerns expressed by other Dutch politicians about the officers’ influential position, arguing that ‘it is not right for us to demand that the military return to the barracks. And who can guarantee human rights? It is about our trust in the intentions of the new government’ (Het Parool, 16-12-1987:3).

Despite this positive statement, only slow progress was made in the recovery of Dutch-Surinamese relations. A clear example demonstrating the wide gap still existing between both nations was The Hague’s decision to send ‘merely’ a member of the Dutch Senate, Bas de Gaay Fortman, to the Shankar cabinet’s inauguration. Schalkwijk, a senior official in the Surinamese Foreign Affairs Department at the time, summed up the anger felt in Paramaribo:

¹ *NRC Handelsblad*, 6-1-1988:2. The NL mistook these civilians for a group of SNLA fighters and opened fire.
² *Haagsche Courant*, 27-1-1988:1. A more detailed discussion on the socio-economic situation and the civil war will be provided later in this Chapter.
‘The Netherlands not being represented by a minister or the Prime Minister at the inauguration was of course remarkable, because it was certainly an opportunity to thoroughly discuss future relations in the margin of the ceremonies’ (Schalkwijk 1994:121).

This initial disappointment was alleviated as both countries agreed to open discussions on financial aid and diplomatic representation. On the first issue, progress was made by February 1988, with Bukman’s announcement that Nf 17 million worth of medicine and food would be provided to ease the suffering caused by the civil war. This money was to be given independently of the remaining development aid (De Ware Tijd, 6-2-1988:1). Nevertheless, considering that at an earlier stage Schoo had also assisted the Republic with medicine and food, Bukman’s initiative could hardly be classified as a sign of trust or support of the newly elected government.

Yet it was not only The Hague hesitating to normalize relations as became clear in the ‘ambassadors issue’. While it took the Netherlands four months after the November elections to send Hoekman back to Paramaribo, the Front coalition needed ten months before it was able to agree on a candidate for The Hague. In the end, Cyrill Ramkisor, a former politician with no diplomatic experience, was chosen to lead the Republic’s primary overseas mission (Schalkwijk 1994:146). Despite the emphasis on closer relations with the Netherlands, ethnic-political quarrels about positions within the administration were given a surprising amount of valuable time.

Confronted by such self-inflicted delays in the aid negotiations, the Surinamese Foreign Affairs Department decided to establish a special commission, called ‘Nederland’, under Van Eer’s supervision, to improve transatlantic ties (Schalkwijk 1994:122). The commission thus began to prepare for a ‘fact finding’ mission to which the Dutch Foreign Minister was invited in the hope of convincing the Lubbers cabinet to make financial assistance available (De Ware Tijd, 14-3-1988:1). But when Van den Broek arrived in the Republic on 28 March 1988, there was no friendly welcome as he and the embarrassed commission members were confronted with a strong anti-Dutch atmosphere reminiscent of De Koning’s visit in 1980. Along the road from the airport to Paramaribo protesters were carrying signs stating ‘Van den Broek Murderer’ and ‘Van den Broek Mercenary’ (De Ware Tijd, 28-3-1988:1). Nails were scattered on the road to try and stop his car while arsonists burned down the KLM office in Paramaribo (Het Parool, 30-3-1988:5). It has never been fully disclosed to what extent these protests were initiated by either the NDP or the NL, but that this is certainly a possibility has never been ruled out.

Van Eer was Suriname’s Minister Plenipotentiary in The Hague during the last years prior to independence and had continued to serve as Ambassador to the Netherlands in the immediate post-independence period, see Chapter II.
Discussions between the Dutch Minister and the Front government did not ease the tension as they merely highlighted the different positions of the two countries. Whereas Van den Broek intended to speak on the issue of whether all Surinamese refugees residing in the Netherlands without legal documents should return to Suriname, Sedoc’s attention was focused on the topic of financial assistance. According to the latter, the Netherlands should honour the promise made in the diplomatic letter of December 1982 (announcing the Aid Treaty’s suspension) to reopen the flow of aid once Suriname’s democratic structures would be re-established. Otherwise, according to Schalkwijk (1994:122), ‘the slow Dutch pace in reinstating the aid was perceived as a delaying tactic in order not to resume the treaty’s obligations’.

Dutch hesitations were not the only problem confronting the government. To make matters worse, during Van den Broek’s visit it became clear that The Hague wanted to ‘internationalize’ the Aid Treaty. This was to be achieved through a consortium composed of delegates from the World Bank and/or the Inter-American Development Bank, along with, possibly, representatives from regional powers such as Brazil and Venezuela, besides Dutch and Surinamese delegates. Paramaribo refused to go down this road. In February 1988 in Willemstad Suriname’s Minister for Transport, Trade and Industry Wilfred Grep had already explained that his government expected The Hague to honour the spirit of the agreement without introducing new conditions – as Van den Broek had promised in December 1987. Grep had stated: ‘If they want to talk about more money, that is OK, but not about changing the treaty. Perhaps we can speak of a different consultation process’ (Haagsche Courant, 8-2-1988:1). Surinamese delegates were willing to discuss ways of improving the decision-making procedures in the agreement, but they utterly refused to discuss a reinterpretation of the treaty.

There were several reasons for Paramaribo to reject the Dutch proposal of internationalizing the aid. Most importantly, the cabinet feared that once The Hague would be able to renegotiate the treaty, it may well seize the opportunity to dismantle the entire programme. According to Schalkwijk (1994:125): ‘within the Surinamese ranks, widespread disapproval was expressed with regard to the internationalization attempt, primarily because it was believed that the Netherlands wanted to use this as a way of breaking open the treaty or changing it’. This could result in the loss of further revenues and, as Paramaribo feared, create severe tensions in other (trade) aspects of bilateral relations, thus complicating the normalization process.

Surinamese officials not only objected to the idea of internationalizing the aid, but also to the manner in which the proposal had been brought forward, namely in the domestic setting of the Netherlands itself, with the governing party CDA advocating the idea as part of its programme for the forthcoming general elections. Considering the corruption scandals within
the former Arron government, it was understandable that the Dutch public was interested in not ‘wasting’ any funds. Yet the Front government was angry that the idea was outlined to the Dutch electorate rather than being communicated to Paramaribo (Schalkwijk 1994:124-9).

Finally, the cabinet objected to internationalizing the aid as it was feared that this could upset the fragile internal political situation. If, for instance, the World Bank was accepted as a supervisory body with a say in how the funds should be spent, Surinamese politicians were concerned that programmes in the social sphere might be evaluated as being of secondary importance, which, it was feared, would make the government unpopular (Caram 1993:296-7). Bouterse’s earlier dealings with the IMF, at the end of 1983 and the beginning of 1984, had clearly illustrated the political consequences of implementing socio-economic reforms according to the demands of international financial institutions. In contrast, at the time of independence Suriname’s delegates in the CONS may have experienced considerable Dutch pressure when it came down to investing the aid, but Paramaribo had been free to use some funds as it desired – a telling example being, despite The Hague’s opposition, the construction of a railway in West Suriname which ‘runs, as they say, from nothing to nowhere’ (Lagerberg 1989:134).

The Republic’s recent efforts to regain access to Dutch assistance were at least partly successful as the States General began to debate the Aid Treaty on the instigation of Van den Broek, who had lobbied his colleagues to reinstate aid and submit this proposal to parliament (de Volkskrant, 30-3-1988:1). Suriname’s initiative to invite Van den Broek for a ‘fact finding’ mission had thus paid off, despite the hostile demonstrations and differences of opinion on the issue of internationalization. More good news for the Shankar government followed when Van den Broek was supported in his campaign by Hoekman, who publicly asserted that Suriname’s redemocratization process had undergone positive developments (Haagsche Courant, 25-3-1988:3).

Despite this wave of approval, the Lubbers cabinet remained uncommitted and merely agreed to send another delegation to Paramaribo in May 1988, this time led by Minister for Development Cooperation Bukman, who declared that his visit was to be ‘informative and orientational’ (Haagsche Courant, 5-5-1988:3). Yet subsequent talks between him and the Front government accomplished little beyond highlighting the wide gap between the two parties. First Bukman rejected Suriname’s request to finance a Sf 1.5 million urgency programme formulated by the Shankar cabinet to speed up economic recovery (De Ware Tijd, 12-5-1988:1), followed by the dismissal of Paramaribo’s request for an additional Nf 260 million to compensate for costs incurred by the Republic with regard to development projects financed by

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4 For the political consequences, see Chapter VI.
Suriname following the suspension of aid. Finally, the Dutch Minister insisted on the internationalization of aid while pressurizing Shankar into accepting a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), to be formulated with the ‘help’ from the World Bank (De Ware Tijd, 13-5-1988:1).

The talks would ultimately fail, much to Suriname’s disappointment, realizing that the recent ground won by Van den Broek might be lost. During a debate in the Assembly Finance Minister Subhas Mungra accused the Netherlands of fostering an ‘evil mentality’ while pointing out that the country’s economy would continue to experience difficulties primarily due to the absence of Dutch development assistance – thus shifting responsibility for Suriname’s socio-economic misery to the Netherlands (De Ware Tijd, 14-5-1988:1). Economic recovery, according to the Minister, could only be achieved if The Hague agreed to provide the necessary funds.

During the same parliamentary debate, Sedoc vehemently dismissed Dutch claims that the urgency programme presented to Bukman had been hastily drawn up on two sheets of paper. Instead, he insisted that the additional funds requested had been well researched. Unfortunately, Surinamese union and business circles not only confirmed that the Sf 1.5 million request had indeed been hastily formulated, but they also accused the Front cabinet of not consulting them when preparing the urgency programme (Dew 1994:166).

The Bukman visit certainly underlined The Hague’s continuing uncompromising stance, which must have frustrated Shankar just as much as it had done Bouterse. It also exposed the ongoing disorganization within the Surinamese cabinet, exemplified by the slapdash preparations. It was obvious that the urgency programme had been formulated in great haste, reflecting disagreement between the VHP and NPS regarding the Republic’s foreign policy towards the Netherlands. Although Lachmon and Mungra were willing to accept Dutch preconditions for financial assistance, Arron categorically rejected The Hague’s demands (Dew 1994:166).

Following the failure to reach an agreement during his first visit, Bukman organized a second trip in July 1988. As an ‘olive branch’, the Dutch Minister now announced an increase in the aid promised in February to Nf 50 million. The Surinamese side also changed tactics. Whereas during his first visit, Bukman had mainly negotiated individually with several Surinamese representatives, this time Vice-President Arron intended to discuss the outstanding aid package directly with the Dutch delegation and thus improve communications between both governments while consolidating Suriname’s foreign policy position (Schalkwijk 1994:145). In addition, as will be outlined later, Paramaribo had just fulfilled one of the primary Dutch demands for reinstating the aid by signing the Kourou Akkoord (Kourou Agreement) with the SNLA. This, it was hoped, would bring an end to the civil war.

Under these more favourable conditions the second Bukman visit became
a success. Both sides finally agreed on a relaunch of the Aid Treaty by specifying the new terms under which the Netherlands would provide a total of Nƒ 1.5 billion. In the first instance, The Hague was to grant Paramaribo Nƒ 100 million in financial and technical assistance for 1988, which was to be increased to Nƒ 200 million in annual aid up until 1996 (Dew 1994:166). Suriname, in its turn, agreed to introduce an Adjustment Policy and Restoration Programme in consultation with the World Bank by 1 October 1988. It also consented to submitting a MOP outlining the specific use of Dutch funds. Finally, the Republic agreed to purchase all imports related to Dutch financed development projects through the Rijksinkoopbureau (RIB, Dutch Central Purchasing Agency) (Dew 1994:166).

Undoubtedly, comparing the outcome of these negotiations with Paramaribo’s earlier position, it becomes obvious that Suriname had again bowed to Dutch pressure. Not only did Arron agree to consult with the World Bank, he had also conceded to the Dutch demand for a MOP and, on top of that, to import all development-related goods and services through the RIB. These concessions subsequently allowed The Hague to ‘supervise’ the Republic’s socio-economic progress more closely than ever before. The main ‘sweetener’ for Suriname was that both sides had also agreed to meet twice yearly to stimulate bilateral trade (De Ware Tijd, 22-7-1988:1). On his return, Bukman expressed his satisfaction with the agreement and claimed that Suriname had given in under the pressure he had exerted. Paramaribo also reacted with relief. Shankar spoke for many Surinamese when he expressed the hope that, after many years under Bouterse and several months of tense negotiations, the redemocratization process and socio-economic development would now finally gain significant strength.

However, the widely anticipated belief that bilateral relations would stabilize proved wrong. The Hague’s repeated threats of expelling thousands of Surinamese to a country torn by civil war and of stringently restricting the number of visa applications for the Netherlands, were only two of the many issues generating transatlantic friction. Another, more contentious issue was the interpretation of the aid agreement. By the end of August Lachmon expressed his dissatisfaction that so far Suriname had received hardly any Dutch funds. He also argued that Paramaribo should play a more decisive role in the decision-making process with regard to which products the RIB was to purchase (De Ware Tijd, 21-8-1988:1-2). Lachmon’s main concern – which was entirely justified, considering Paramaribo’s extensive reliance on aid from The Hague during the pre-coup period – was that local and regional goods and services would be ignored by the Dutch agency.

The Lubbers cabinet promptly countered that products purchased by the

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5 A Dutch court eventually ruled that it was unsafe to resettle the refugees, see Dew 1994:167.
RIB were not necessarily manufactured within the Netherlands (Thorndike 1990:59). Furthermore, the new aid framework was justified by stating that it would limit the misuse of funds since Suriname would thus be unable to draw cash directly from the Dutch treasury. Instead, the Republic had to provide a list of goods and services to be acquired by the RIB, which in preparation had established an office in Paramaribo (De Ware Tijd, 21-9-1988:1). Subsequently, the expenditure of the RIB was covered by the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation.

These arrangements actually enabled The Hague to more easily raise objections to Surinamese requests than had been possible within the pre-1982 framework. The Hague also increased its leverage, as MOP funding was directly linked to political objectives such as progress in the redemocratization and peace process (Dew 1994:167). Suriname’s failure, for instance, to honour the Kourou Agreement – the civil war continued – at the time of the Dutch parliamentary debate on the first Nf 200 million in aid (in November 1988), resulted in the House of Representatives once again putting the aid programme on hold (De Ware Tijd, 16-11-1988:1). It would take another month before the States General finally ratified the July agreement and allowed the transfer of financial assistance for 1989 (Dew 1994:167).

**Suriname’s descent into obscurity**

In contrast to The Hague’s hesitant approach towards Suriname, other countries reacted more swiftly to the Republic’s return to democratic rule. At the inauguration of the Shankar cabinet, Brazil had already promised a credit of US$ 36 million to be used to advance Suriname’s industrialization and telecommunications. Another US$ 6 million was granted to buy food and medicine for the victims of the civil war (Haagse Courant, 30-1-1988:3). In the same vein, Venezuela offered help to establish and manage the local oil industry (Thorndike 1989:108). To show their support and appreciation of Suriname’s redemocratization, Brasilia and Caracas decided to send their respective Foreign Ministers to witness the inauguration of the new civilian cabinet (Schalkwijk 1994:115).

Other Latin American and Caribbean states also welcomed the recent political changes within the Republic, with several nations sending cabinet members to attend the inauguration (Schalkwijk 1994:115). More importantly, additional regional funds were made available. The Inter-American Development Bank provided US$ 2.2 million in technical aid to modernize the country’s power supply installations (Thorndike 1989:108), while on Aruba more than Nf 100,000 was collected for Suriname during a televised fund-raising event (Haagse Courant, 28-3-1988:5). Even Washington announced
the release of the remaining US$ 500,000 in financial assistance, which had been suspended following the December Murders (*NRC Handelsblad*, 26-1-1988:1).

Yet the American decision to reinstate the former aid programme reflected a perilous new trend. While officially welcoming the new Constitution, free elections and the formation of a civilian cabinet – Washington’s three main conditions for normalizing diplomatic ties (*Haagsche Courant*, 26-1-1988:1) – the US$ 500,000 reflected the limited importance of the small Republic to the White House. Once the Cuban ambassador had been expelled and the strength of the Libyan mission had been reduced to five diplomats (Thorndike 1989:108), Paramaribo began to disappear from the political map. With this, Washington once again adopted its pre-coup position, declaring that ‘Suriname is a problem for the old mother country, Holland’ (Brana-Shute 1990:201).

In other words, with the notable exception of some regional nations, other countries, particularly in the industrialized world, began to lose what little interest they originally had in the Republic’s affairs. And it comes as no surprise that this re-emerging belief of Suriname somehow having remained part of the Dutch ‘orbit’ contributed to intensifying Paramaribo’s dependence on the Netherlands. To make matters worse, this ‘push’ into a patron-client relationship with The Hague occurred at a time of much hesitation within the Lubbers cabinet about embracing the Shankar government. Consequently, most of the foreign policy ground gained during the Bouterse era – exemplified in Suriname’s increased interaction outside traditional Dutch-Surinamese relations – began to ebb away.

Even though Shankar naturally appreciated any support for the country’s fragile economy, the short list of donors was disappointing. By the end of 1988 no additional funds worth mentioning had been received, except the aforementioned aid along with some financial assistance received from India (Thorndike 1989:108). This situation would not significantly improve in the following years. It was not until April 1989 that the European Community began to consider expanding its long-standing aid programme (*De Ware Tijd*, 1-4-1989:1).

One reason for this policy change may have been the pressure exercised by ACP states at a meeting with the European Community in March 1988. In a similar fashion to the mid-1980s, developing nations had carried a motion calling on the Netherlands and other European states to support Suriname (*De Ware Tijd*, 29-3-1988:1) – a rare occasion of Third World solidarity with the Republic. However, there certainly was another reason behind the European Community’s new approach, namely the EC Commission for Development Cooperation’s positive evaluation of Suriname’s redemocratization process. Unlike the Dutch government, this Commission (ironically chaired by Dutch
CDA politician Wim Vergeer) did not want to wait until Paramaribo had fulfilled all political and economic prerequisites before increasing its aid payments. Instead, Vergeer warned: ‘You have to ask yourself how long a young democracy can survive economic stagnation’ (de Volkskrant, 1-4-1989:7).

Moreover, the Commission disputed the Dutch position that the NL still had too much power in the Republic’s political affairs. ‘Compared with other South American countries that are recovering from a military dictatorship Suriname is making great progress in the democratization process’, according to Vergeer (de Volkskrant, 1-4-1989:7).

In 1990 additional aid was received from Belgium and the PRC. Besides the 25 Belgian aid workers already active in the Republic, Brussels signed a development cooperation agreement worth Nƒ 17 million for Suriname’s fishery industry and electrical power supply installations. The Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Huaqui agreed to furnish Nƒ 1.7 million in aid and a further Nƒ 11 million as an interest-free loan (NRC Handelsblad, 20-2-1990:7, 27-2-1990:2).

There can be no doubt that this limited financial assistance was insufficient to bring about a reversal in Suriname’s stagnating, or rather deteriorating socio-economic fortunes. Due to the Front’s limited success in attracting external development funds, the economy continued to experience severe difficulties in the late 1980s and, as The Europa world year book (1993:2677) commented, ‘at the beginning of the 1990s it was thought to be unlikely that there would be any significant improvement’.

The virtually imperceptible economic advancement is demonstrated in the following three tables. The first table enumerates Suriname’s primary export commodities, which continued to be dominated by the mining and processing of bauxite. While the exports of shrimps, rice, rice products and bananas remained fairly stable, there is a visible growth in the exports of alumina and aluminium between 1988 and 1989 – as a result of the mining companies and the government agreeing to end export levies and to introduce a special exchange rate (applicable only to Suralco and Billiton) of Sf 3.1 to the US dollar. Under these more favourable conditions, in the summer of 1988 multinational corporations reopened some processing facilities (which had been forced to suspend production during the civil war) and even began to import bauxite from the Dominican Republic for processing into alumina. Moreover, in order to ensure a regular supply of electricity for mining and processing activities Shankar ordered the military to attack the SNLA in the Brokopondo area in October 1988 in a bid to break the deadlock (Haagsche Courant, 29-10-1988:7).

6 The official rate was Sf 1,79 to the US$ whereas the black market rate stood at Sf 8 to the US$, see Thorndike 1989:107.
VII Return to the patron-client relationship

Table 13. Suriname’s main exports in millions (Sƒ), 1985-1990

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<td>Alumina</td>
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<td>522.5</td>
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<td>6.3</td>
<td>26.2</td>
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<td>79.4</td>
<td>55.8</td>
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<td>Rice &amp; rice</td>
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<td>58.6</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>71.1</td>
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Source: Central Bank of Suriname, in Country profile 1995:46

By 1990 alumina and aluminium exports had once again declined, the consequences of which are revealed in Table 14. Whereas from 1988 until 1989 the value of the trade balance had grown by over Sƒ 100 million to a Sƒ 218.3 million surplus, the following year it fell to Sƒ 91.5 million. A further reduction led to a trade deficit of Sƒ 1.2 million in 1991 – despite a decrease in the value of imports. The only reason for the Republic to once again achieve a trade surplus was due to a faster reduction of imports than exports.

Table 14. Foreign trade trends in millions (Sƒ), 1988-1993

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exports</td>
<td>358.4</td>
<td>549.2</td>
<td>465.9</td>
<td>345.9</td>
<td>341.0</td>
<td>298.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imports</td>
<td>-239.4</td>
<td>-330.9</td>
<td>-374.4</td>
<td>-347.1</td>
<td>-272.5</td>
<td>-213.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>118.9</td>
<td>218.3</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
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Source: IMF, in Country profile 1995:45

The ongoing civil war was the main stimulus of this unfavourable economic trend. In the summer of 1989 the NL was forced to again attack the Jungle Commando at the Afobaka Dam (after Brunswijk had re-established control of the hydropower plant) and the conflict in the Brokopondo area would continue for another year before the electricity supply was eventually secured on a permanent basis in May 1990 (De Ware Tijd, 5-6-1989:1, 8-5-1989:1). Moreover, the multinational corporations suffered from the SNLA occupation of important mining facilities in Moengo. Not until June 1990, following an appeal by Shankar to ‘liberate’ the town, was the NL able to expel the Jungle...
Commando from the region (*NRC Handelsblad*, 8-6-1990:3). However, despite the army’s ‘victory’, Suralco was still unable to start production. Instead now Bouterse used his control over Moengo to put pressure on the Front cabinet to take a stronger stand against the SNLA. In other words, the ‘liberators’ became the new ‘occupiers’.

In a bid to shift the bauxite industry away from the war-torn eastern region around the Afobaka Dam, the idea re-emerged to build an alternative hydroelectric dam in West Suriname (*De Ware Tijd*, 31-1-1989:1). Shortly after the transfer of sovereignty the former Arron government had already invested large amounts of Dutch funds in the construction of a dam across the Kabalebo river. The fly in the ointment was that The Hague, haunted by memories of the financial fiasco during the post-coup period, was highly critical of this ‘new’ scheme. Yet without Dutch support Paramaribo was unable to finance the project.

The reason for this inability becomes clear in government revenue and expenditure between 1987 and 1991 as revealed in Table 15. Although revenues increased slightly, from Sf 639.4 million in 1988 to Sf 708.4 million in 1991 (a year in which a small decrease actually occurred compared with 1990), expenditure grew steadily from Sf 951 at the end of the Bouterse era to Sf 1303.6 million in 1991. This gap caused a significant budget deficit, rising from Sf 485.2 million in 1987 to Sf 595.2 million in 1991.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tax</strong></td>
<td>317.8</td>
<td>479.0</td>
<td>502.4</td>
<td>511.5</td>
<td>549.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-tax</strong></td>
<td>148.0</td>
<td>160.4</td>
<td>238.0</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>158.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Revenue</strong></td>
<td>465.8</td>
<td>639.4</td>
<td>740.4</td>
<td>733.9</td>
<td>708.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recurrent</strong></td>
<td>922.4</td>
<td>1,108.2</td>
<td>1,081.0</td>
<td>1,150.6</td>
<td>1,181.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capital</strong></td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>103.0</td>
<td>122.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expenditure</strong></td>
<td>951.0</td>
<td>1,149.9</td>
<td>1,143.5</td>
<td>1,253.6</td>
<td>1,303.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance</strong></td>
<td>-485.2</td>
<td>-510.5</td>
<td>-403.1</td>
<td>-519.7</td>
<td>-595.2</td>
</tr>
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Source: Central Bank of Suriname, in *Country profile* 1995:44

The implications of these economic and financial developments were immediately felt by the general population. While unofficial unemployment stood at around 36% in 1988 and remained high in the subsequent years, inflation accelerated from 8% in 1988 to 26.5% in 1991 (*Country profile* 1995:39), primarily due to the government’s practice of simply printing new bank notes.
as a means of covering deficits (*de Volkskrant*, 5-7-1989:7). These compound problems inevitably led to labour unrest throughout the post-election period. In the spring and summer of 1989 the four leading unions – united in the Raad van Vakcentrales in Suriname (RAVAKSUR, Council of Trade Unions in Suriname) – called for a strike in protest against the civil war, the military interference in politics, the high prices and the Dutch refusal to provide direct financial assistance (*Trouw*, 5-5-1989:5).

To help alleviate public dissatisfaction, the Front coalition introduced measures regulating the price of basic commodities (*de Volkskrant*, 30-5-1989:3). But before these could take effect the country was deeply shocked by a Suriname Airways DC-8 aircraft crashing on 7 June on its return from Amsterdam near Zanderij Airport with 182 passengers on board; among the dead were several of Suriname’s top football players (*De Ware Tijd*, 8-6-1989:1). Only a few passengers survived. Dew (1994:174), linking the crash to Suriname’s overall deteriorating socio-economic conditions, commented that later reports indicated that more lives might have been saved had equipment been summoned more rapidly to the scene, and the rescuers had been less interested in looting the site. Financial scandals had plagued Suriname Airways’ operations over the years. [...] The crash investigation revealed dangerous cost-cutting methods. The control tower’s guidance system was not working, and members of the crew, including the pilot, were beyond retirement age and working at below scale.

As the only other DC-8 was stranded in Luxembourg awaiting major repairs, Suriname Airways had no option but to cancel its vital line to Amsterdam altogether (*de Volkskrant*, 8-6-1989:7).

The public mood turned to one of despair. General poverty bred corruption and crime, accelerating particularly at the end of 1989. Combined with political violence, the period was characterized by drive-by shootings at police stations, armed robberies along the Zanderij road, and destruction of a courthouse by arson. These events provoked a round-up of suspects (mostly Amerindian) by the police, and in apparent retaliation, a policeman was assassinated in Paranam in December. Arson destroyed three old colonial residences located behind an aggressive anti-Bouterse news agency when fire grenades launched at the agency went astray [...] Over the New Year’s holidays, a grenade was hurled at the home of Finance Minister Subhas Mungra (without causing any damage). (Dew 1994:175-6.)

Following the killing of a Soviet diplomat by three youngsters (without a political motive) during a robbery attempt in April 1990 (*Het Parool*, 11-4-1990:3), crime became such a common feature in Paramaribo that many citizens tried to avoid leaving their homes at night.

One month later the Front came under additional public pressure as unions...
once again called for a strike in protest of the socio-economic situation. In May students organized a demonstration against high public transport prices (NRC Handelsblad, 15-5-1990:7) and in June RAVAKSUR announced another strike following the government’s failure to accept several demands previously presented by the unions, including higher wages, the military’s withdrawal from politics, the combating of widespread corruption, the curbing of the flourishing black market and the ending of the country’s involvement in drug trafficking (Het Parool, 22-6-1990:1). As a result of the Front’s failure to tackle these issues, Paramaribo’s harbour and airport were affected by industrial actions which soon spread to other economic sectors.

A new problem threatening Suriname’s domestic stability emerged as a minor clash between an officer of the Military Police (MP) and a member of the general police force in a Paramaribo bar led to severe tension between the two agencies. Following the arrests of several MP officers by the police, the military attacked police headquarters in Paramaribo in August 1990. Its chief, Inspector Herman Gooding, subsequently met with Bouterse but was killed after leaving the Lieutenant Colonel’s office (Dew 1994:180). The police force, supported by the public, now openly accused the NL of shooting Gooding, and its union, the Surinaamse Politie Bond (SPB, Police Union of Suriname) called for a strike. As the government refused to arrest the responsible army officers, 300 of the country’s 1,200 police officers applied for visa at the Dutch embassy, leaving the Republic with a severely compromised law enforcement capacity (NRC Handelsblad, 28-8-1990:1).

The civil war and its international impact

The misery did not end there. In the field of foreign policy, Paramaribo enjoyed only infrequent achievements. A rare moment of success came exactly one year after the November 1987 elections, with the Liberation Council dissolving itself. Ignored by the civilian politicians after the country’s return to democracy, it had gained little influence in Surinamese affairs (De Ware Tijd, 30-11-1988:1). With its disintegration, a once powerful exile organization disappeared from the political scene. Another positive occurrence was the agreement concluded with the Netherlands Antilles in May 1989 to intensify bilateral trade relations. By increasing its rice exports to the Antillian islands, Paramaribo was able to pay off some of its debts to Willemstad (De Ware Tijd, 18-5-1989:1). And the Surinamese swimmer Anthony Nesty winning a gold medal at the Olympics in Seoul in September 1988 contributed to improving Suriname’s badly damaged international image (De Ware Tijd, 22-9-1988:1).

However, despite Bouterse’s apparent withdrawal from politics, the international perception of the Republic would remain tainted, primarily
because the ongoing civil war and its associated human rights violations continued to embarrass the government. In fact, the fighting between the SNLA and the military had flared up following the November elections due to Brunswijk’s deep mistrust of the influential political position of the NL. According to the Jungle Commando’s leader, ‘elections will have no effect whatsoever if the situation does not fundamentally change with the military remaining the boss […] I will continue to fight until freedom and democracy are truly restored’ (Van der Beek 1987:138). For its part, the NL showed no desire to end the conflict, which was underlined by Bouterse’s reference to Brunswijk as a ‘terrorist’ and his rejection of the aforementioned Dutch mediation offer. The return to democratic rule thus had no effect on the positions of neither the SNLA nor of the army. There was no end in sight to this dismal situation as, according to Brana-Shute (1995:88), ‘the military was unable to effectively fight the insurgents while the Jungle Commando was unable to hold territory’. The sad result of this stalemate was that over 10,000 Surinamese had meanwhile been forced to flee to French Guiana.

Nevertheless, Dutch pressure on the Front to end the civil war had increased to such an extent by the summer of 1988 that a government delegation led by the Director of the Foreign Affairs Department, Van Eer, met with the SNLA to discuss a peace settlement. During this meeting, initiated by the Comité Christelijke Kerken (CCK, Committee of Christian Churches), both sides considered the deployment of an international peacekeeping force – composed of troops from OAS states – in the war-torn region as the best option for ending the conflict. However, on his return to Paramaribo Van Eer was peremptorily informed that this arrangement was unacceptable. While Bouterse dismissed the idea as this would effectively result in reducing the NL’s influence in eastern Suriname, it was also rejected by Shankar as he was trying to limit international exposure of the civil war (De Ware Tijd, 6-7-1988:1). Instead, the Prime Minister believed that the Republic ‘is capable of solving its own problems through dialogue’ (Haagsche Courant, 6-7-1988:7).

Two additional reasons, it should be noted, bore heavily on Shankar’s negative response. First, the cabinet obviously feared an open confrontation with the military once Bouterse had made his view known (Haagsche Courant, 5-8-1988:2). Second, in a letter from the Surinamese government to the OAS (which was investigating human rights abuses under the former regimes), the Front was clearly reluctant to be held accountable for the clash between the SNLA and the military, stating in response to concerns raised about specific human rights violations:

The Government which took office on January 26th 1988 is not to be blamed for the occurrence at issue. [...] The Government deprecates that the peace process has been deadlocked for the time being and that the eagerly desired peace still seems to be
far away. In passing, the Government wonders if it can be held responsible for that. (Price 1995:451.)

Notwithstanding, the main reason for Shankar’s rejection was, as stated, his fear of the conflict becoming an international issue. It is in this context that Graanoogst’s blunt warning to Paris in August 1988, that it must not endanger Suriname’s security by supporting Brunswijk, should be evaluated. The French authorities dismissed this warning and reiterated their neutral position (De Ware Tijd, 3-8-1988:1, 5-8-1988:1). But neutrality did not imply silence, especially as Paris spent about 6 million francs (about Nf 2 million guilders) per month on food, medicine and shelter for the numerous refugees (Het Parool, 10-12-1987:10) – leading the French Ministry for Overseas Territories to issue an international appeal aimed to attract over one hundred Dutch-speaking teachers willing to educate Surinamese children living in French Guiana (Het Parool, 19-10-1988:5).

Although this French appeal angered the Front as it drew international attention to the Republic, in the end the Surinamese authorities themselves attracted the most regional and global interest through their clumsy efforts to prevent human rights violations from being publicized. On returning home from the fortieth anniversary celebration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Washington in December 1988, Stanley Rensch, the Surinamese chairman of Moiwana ’86 (a Surinamese human rights organization founded after the NL massacre of Maroons in 1986), was arrested at Zanderij Airport. Soon after the military took several more Moiwana ’86 activists into custody (De Ware Tijd, 12-12-1988:1, 14-12-1988:1).

Within days the OAS sent a delegation to Paramaribo, led by Oliver Jackman, to discuss the Rensch affair along with general human rights issues. During the subsequent meeting with the Surinamese Foreign Minister, Jackman pointed out that since Shankar’s inauguration, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission had not received any reports about human rights violations in Suriname yet this positive record was now called into question (De Ware Tijd, 15-12-1988:1). In addition, Van den Broek instructed his Ambassador to express The Hague’s concern about the recent arrests. Feeling the pressure, the Front government, embarrassed by the NL’s unilateral actions, released Rensch and his colleagues before Christmas (De Ware Tijd, 22-12-1988:1).

Yet the damage was done. International interest in the civil war increased with the UNHCR now beginning to provide support to the refugees. With the approval of the French and Surinamese authorities, offices were established in Paramaribo and in St. Laurent. Moreover, in cooperation with the Front and financed by Dutch development aid, the UNHCR intended to repatriate the refugees from French Guiana (de Volkskrant, 7-2-1989:6), although this
was unlikely to occur as long as the civil war continued. The conflict became increasingly complex as the support for both sides was less than clear-cut. This was demonstrated by events in the village of Pokigron, which was attacked by the NL in September 1987 and in January 1988 for its apparent support of Brunswijk, while in April 1989 it was the SNLA that burned down over fifty houses in retaliation for the villagers’ refusal to cooperate with the Maroon guerrillas.\(^7\)

Following the unsuccessful peace efforts in the summer of 1988, representatives of the Front and the SNLA met at the end of that year in the Netherlands and, from February 1989, in French Guiana. This time Lachmon took over the initiative from the Committee of Christian Churches and on account of his personal intervention, both parties came to an arrangement, which was signed by Brunswijk and Lachmon in Kourour (French Guiana) on 21 July 1989. With this, the government agreed to lift the state of emergency in the war-torn region (thus terminating the NL’s special powers), to allow eastern Suriname to be represented in the government, to provide development aid, to resettle refugees, to reconstruct areas affected by the war and to integrate the SNLA into the police force. In return, the Jungle Commando agreed to demilitarize its units (De Ware Tijd, 3-8-1989:1).

Yet the agreement would not restore peace. Bouterse was extremely critical of any arrangements with the Jungle Commando and the SNLA’s proposed integration into the police force in particular fuelled his opposition. When he called the peace treaty totally unacceptable, this consequently increased tensions between the military and the cabinet (De Ware Tijd, 24-7-1989:1), which added to the strains resulting from the Assembly passing a general amnesty law in April 1989 for all civil war related violence except human rights abuses (which were predominantly carried out by the NL). Bouterse had warned the government to reject this law; otherwise he could not guarantee that the furious officers would refrain from taking action. Indeed, the military unequivocally expressed its discontent when the military police stormed a public jail and released two members of the Volksmilitie (People’s Militia) who had been accused of participating in the killing of Maroons (Dew 1994:170).

Besides the NL opposition, the government was also faced with armed Amerindian resistance protesting against the Kourou Agreement. In September the Tucayana Amazon Indians hijacked a ferry and a small aircraft in West Suriname and blocked the road to Zanderij Airport with the objective of rejecting, according to a pamphlet, ‘the privileges and the special position’ apparently gained by the SNLA (De Ware Tijd, 2-9-1989:1). Although a repre-

\(^7\) Dew 1994:169. The NL and the SNLA regarded the village of Pokigron, close to the Afohaka Dam, of strategic importance.
sentative of the organization Yarowato (representing the interests of Amerindians in Suriname and the Netherlands) Wolfjager initially asserted that the violence was the outcome of the government’s neglect of Amerindian welfare (**de Volkskrant**, 2-9-1989:6), it soon became clear that the NL was behind the uprising. In Brana-Shute’s words (1993:59-60):

Members of the National Assembly and representatives from various human rights groups have [...] testified that the army trained and armed Tucayana Amazon rebels throughout West Suriname and in an enclave along the coast adjacent to French Guiana. It was estimated that by early 1990 there were some 75 to 100 heavily armed Tucayana whose activities were alleged coordinated by a lieutenant of the Surinamese army.

This unexpected development was a serious setback for the Front. Under severe Dutch and international pressure to end the civil war, the government had just signed the Kourou Agreement. According to Paramaribo’s calculations, the political and socio-economic situation should now be improving since The Hague had promised more aid once peace was restored (**De Ware Tijd**, 13-7-1989:1-2). All this was now put in jeopardy by the sudden violent attacks by Amerindians on Maroons.8

Bouterse’s tactics of undermining the peace process seemed to pay off. During the following months additional rebel groups emerged among the Matawai and Saramaka Maroons. As with the Tucayanas, these rebels did not enjoy the general support of their respective communities but rather depended on supplies from and training by the NL (Brana-Shute 1996:479). Yet they were still able to disrupt Suriname’s socio-economic sector, which was exemplified in October 1989 by the Tucayanas’ attack on Moengo, at the time controlled by the Unie tot Bevrijding en Democratie (UBD, Union for Liberation and Democracy), itself a break-away group from the SNLA (**De Ware Tijd**, 31-10-1989:1). As a result of these coordinated attacks by the NL and other rebel groups on the Jungle Commando, Brunswijk was ready to renegotiate the Kourou Agreement which he described as ‘a bad cheque’ (**de Volkskrant**, 21-12-1989:8).

This continuing spiral of violence resulted in the wider internationalization of the civil war. Whereas thus far, concerns had primarily been expressed by The Hague, Paris, the UNHCR and the OAS, it was now the turn of the United States to comment on the Republic’s domestic instability. In January 1990 Suriname’s Ambassador to Washington, former Prime Minister Udenhout, was told by the State Department that Washington was highly dissatisfied with the stagnating peace process and the military’s continual interference

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8 Although it must be pointed out that between Maroons and Amerindians some long-standing animosity had existed born of their competition for territory, see Brana-Shute 1993:60.
in politics (*Het Parool*, 23-1-1990:3). To clarify Washington’s position, Sedoc, in turn, asked the American Ambassador to Suriname, Richard Howland, for a meeting. At this occasion the envoy not only verbally repeated American concerns, but also delivered a letter outlining the State Department’s criticism (*NRC Handelsblad*, 22-1-1990:3). Obviously aware that Brunswijk had succumbed to renegotiating the Kourou Agreement, the White House put pressure on the Front and the NL not to torpedo the peace agreement.

The American reaction was appreciated by neither party in the conflict. Sedoc recalled Udenhout from Washington for consultations and accused the State Department of interfering in Suriname’s domestic affairs. He lost no time pointing out that the Republic, ‘according to its own insight and in its own pace, while retaining its own traditions’, would establish peace in the war-torn region. Similarly, Arron argued that ‘Suriname refuses to be directed from abroad as to how the country should re-establish order’. And Bouterse called the State Department’s letter ‘the latest in the interminable series of American attempts to intervene in the internal affairs of Suriname’ (*NRC Handelsblad*, 1-2-1990:2). Rather than supporting the SNLA, the United States had achieved the opposite by uniting the government and the military.

Yet despite the animosity it aroused, external interference would not be without success. This was revealed as Shankar tried hard to put the peace process back on track by inviting Brunswijk to Paramaribo. Bouterse also invited the SNLA leader to a private meeting but instead of negotiating with Brunswijk, he simply arrested him during a violent clash in which two bodyguards of the rebel leader were killed (*NRC Handelsblad*, 27-3-1990:1). This time it was The Hague to react furiously. The Lubbers cabinet put so much pressure on Paramaribo that Brunswijk was released the next day; subsequently, the civilian authorities began to introduce measures to limit the NL’s influence.

Whilst the government thus attempted to curtail the army’s constitutional rights, the NL and SNLA intensified their military operations with heavy fighting breaking out around Moengo and Brokopondo. Following the Jungle Commando’s withdrawal from both regions, Brunswijk retreated to French Guiana and eventually travelled to the Netherlands with the intention of seeking asylum there in the summer of 1990. The Dutch government, although sympathetic to Brunswijk, stressed that it would not grant the rebel leader political asylum. He was thus forced to return to Suriname, where he was confronted with an increasingly active military that meanwhile had attacked the SNLA’s headquarters at Langatabbetje (*NRC Handelsblad*, 4-7-1990:3, 14-7-1990:1).

This escalation of the conflict led to Shankar’s decision, at an OAS conference in Asunción, Paraguay, to reconsider the idea he had previously rejected, namely the possible intervention of Latin American peacekeepers.
Alternative international intervention was now also sought by Brunswijk, who called upon the Dutch, American and French authorities to restrain the NL’s campaign (*Trouw*, 30-7-1990:1). The result of these calls for outside intervention was a new government initiative to seek contact with the SNLA through a mediator, the OAS representative Edgardo Reis.

**Dutch-Surinamese relations, 1989-1990**

Against the background of these domestic difficulties Dutch-Surinamese relations would only slowly improve. The new aid agreement not merely manifestly demonstrated Suriname’s continued financial dependence on the Netherlands, but also its political vulnerability to pressure exerted by the former colonial master. Although the exact amount of annual aid had been fixed (at least in theory), thus giving Paramaribo some form of financial security, this came at the price of strict Dutch scrutiny on issues such as the military’s constitutional position and its involvement in drug trafficking. The Hague’s ‘urge’ to be involved in ‘advising’ Paramaribo would prevail, despite Shankar’s desperate plea not to intervene too blatantly. He feared that Dutch criticism, particularly of the armed forces, might well result in a clash between the Front and the NL, with a possibly disastrous outcome for the redemocratization process; or might cause a diplomatic conflict between the Republic and the Netherlands if the cabinet failed to take The Hague’s sides against the military.

Aware of this danger, members of the Assembly invited a Dutch parliamentary delegation to visit Paramaribo in November 1988. Even though this meeting indicated a positive step towards improving transatlantic links, the Assembly’s initiative to promote closer contact between the House of Representatives and the NL (with the aim of creating a better understanding of the fragile domestic political situation) failed, as the Dutch turned down the invitation to speak with Bouterse (*Haagsche Courant*, 8-11-1988:3).

This rejection clearly signalled that the uneasy relationship between Dutch politicians and Surinamese officers would continue to be the primary point of friction. The Front’s fear of a clash between The Hague and the NL became a reality when the following month the military arrested Rob van der Kroon, one of the Dutch diplomats in Paramaribo who, according to the officers, had failed to ‘sufficiently’ identify himself (*Haagsche Courant*, 31-12-1988:5). The protest letter issued by the Dutch Foreign Affairs Department was answered by an official apology by Shankar, assuring Lubbers that his government would introduce procedures so as to avoid a repeat of the incident.

Yet tensions between The Hague and NL increased once again when early
in 1989 VVD parliamentary leader Joris Voorhoeve renewed allegations that Bouterse and several of his colleagues were involved in drug trafficking. The VVD demanded an investigation and threatened, if the claims were substantiated, to introduce a motion in the House of Representatives calling for the suspension of aid (De Ware Tijd, 14-2-1989:1). Paramaribo, understandably, reacted nervously to the risk of once again losing Dutch funding and Justice Minister Jules Adjodhia angrily demanded that ‘Voorhoeve should not get involved in Suriname’s internal affairs’ (de Volkskrant, 28-2-1989:3).

The Dutch parliament, however, was in no mood to ignore the issue, particularly since a large part of Surinamese drugs were shipped to the Netherlands. Whereas Dutch customs officers at Schiphol had confiscated 102 kilograms of Surinamese cocaine between the end of November 1988 and early February 1989, by contrast the NL, partly responsible for checking international departures and arrivals at Zanderij, had not seized any illegal drug shipments at all (NRC Handelsblad, 11-2-1989:3).

Even though the Front acknowledged the surge in drug trafficking to the Netherlands, it rejected the idea that Suriname was to blame for the cocaine problem. Adjodhia demanded that the Dutch Justice Department share information with their Surinamese colleagues concerning the NL’s involvement in the drug trade: ‘Our government had to read [about this issue] in the newspapers. We are still hoping to receive all the information but the investigation here has quickly come to a dead end’ (de Volkskrant, 28-2-1989:3). The Surinamese Minister also questioned Dutch accusations that the Republic was a major source of cocaine for the Netherlands since ‘the flights do not always start at Zanderij and there are also calls en route’. Finally, he pointed out that ‘also in highly developed countries, where they work with special machines [to detect drugs], smuggling occurs’ (de Volkskrant, 28-2-1989:3).

Surprised by Suriname’s firm rejection of bearing the responsibility alone, the Dutch Justice Department, which initially failed to substantiate its claims (De Ware Tijd, 27-2-1989:1), came under pressure to search for evidence confirming Voorhoeve’s accusations. Eventually, on 11 April, Chairman of the Commissie voor Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdiensten (Commission for Intelligence and Security Services) Frits Korthals Altes informed Lubbers of evidence found, linking Bouterse to drug trafficking (de Volkskrant, 16-11-1989:3). This information, based on data collected by the Centrale Recherche Informatiedienst (CRI, Dutch Central Research and Information Service), was neither made public nor used to put pressure on the Front as, following a heated debate between Voorhoeve and Adjodhia, The Hague feared it would dangerously strain Dutch-Surinamese relations. Additional investigations by the CRI and the Copa-police team throughout 1989 and 1990 eventually provided The Hague with a comprehensive picture of Suriname’s involvement in the cocaine trade.
Following a series of arrests and the tapping of telephone conversations in the Netherlands, the Dutch police used a 140 kilogram cocaine shipment, intercepted in the harbour of Amsterdam in March 1990, to illustrate how drugs were transported from Latin America to Europe. In this case it concerned a shipment organized by the Medellin Cartel, which flew the cocaine from Colombia to the Brazilian town of Santarem, from where it was transported to Paramaribo by ship. In Suriname the drugs were then loaded aboard the Nedlloyd ship the *Kingston* bound for Amsterdam. The profits earned in this specific shipment were enormous, considering that at the Brazilian port a kilogram of cocaine was traded at US$ 1,600 whereas in Amsterdam the price had increased to Nƒ 70,000 or around US$ 41,500.  

As a place for transferring drugs from one ship to another, Paramaribo harbour had become known as a ‘secure’ distribution centre. This was possible since, following a cash payment, military officers allowed this transfer to take place without a customs inspection (*NRC Handelsblad*, 11-9-1990:1). Some of the information thus gathered by the Dutch police revealed that Bouterse maintained direct contacts with leading drug barons. Not only did he allow Suriname to be used as a transfer centre (around one third of all cocaine shipments reaching the Netherlands were estimated to have come from the Republic), but it was also assumed in The Hague that Suriname’s rainforest served as a cover to protect local drug plantations and laboratories (*NRC Handelsblad*, 22-3-1990:7).

Some of this information was eventually handed over to the Surinamese Minister of Justice during his visit along with his senior staff to the Netherlands in February 1990. Following Adjodhia’s return to Paramaribo, the Surinamese police arrested several cocaine couriers and raided drug plantations. Some 160,000 marijuana plants were burned in the Brokopondo area (discovered by the SNLA) (*NRC Handelsblad*, 19-2-1990:3) and in June a high-ranking officer responsible for the clearance of luggage at Zanderij was arrested (and quickly released on account of his senior military status) (*NRC Handelsblad*, 12-6-1990:1).

The most interesting point in this cocaine trade was that The Hague attempted to exploit the situation to pursue two main objectives. First, it hoped to put pressure on the Front to punish the officers involved in the trafficking and reduce the political influence of the military. Second, the Lubbers government, aware of Suriname’s negative image among the Dutch general public, manipulated this situation by using the Republic as a scapegoat for the cocaine problem in the Netherlands. In other words, as the Dutch authorities gathered evidence on the drug trade, this information was handed over to their Surinamese counterparts, who were expected to destroy the transporta-

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9 *NRC Handelsblad*, 11-9-1990:3. The exchange rate on 31-12-1990 was US$ 1 to Nƒ 1.6865.
tion network and prevent narcotics from being shipped across the Atlantic. The possibility that Bouterse was involved in these illegal activities was a convenient coincidence, enabling The Hague to denounce the military strongman vehemently.

For the Front government the situation was very different. After several years of economic hardship, the Surinamese customs service lacked financial and human resources. There were no special dogs to detect cocaine and not enough officers to carry out adequate controls. According to the Chairman of the Surinaamse Douanebond (Surinamese Customs Officers’ Union) ‘six customs officers have to deal with an entire plane. Luggage is inspected cursorily and air cargo is only checked at random’ (de Volkskrant, 28-2-1989:3). More worrying were the growing tensions between politicians and officers as the government, under increasing Dutch pressure, was forced to act against the NL – if it failed to do so, it might lose out on financial assistance.

The whole situation was exacerbated by the fact that the Front cabinet had to combat the drug trafficking largely without Dutch support. The main reason for The Hague’s ‘inability’ to assist the Republic in this was that the bilateral treaty on judicial cooperation, addressing important issues such as the coordination of strategies between the two national police forces and the extradition of suspected criminals, had been suspended following the December Murders (de Volkskrant, 15-2-1989:6). Adjodhia’s visit to the Netherlands in February 1990 was partly aimed at reinstating this treaty. In order not to alarm the NL, the visit was largely kept secret and involved only a few high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Justice. Nonetheless, The Hague rejected the proposal to renew the treaty due to the officers’ continued powerful position in Suriname’s domestic politics (de Volkskrant, 15-02-1989:6).

Also in other areas The Hague was reluctant to lend the new government a helping hand. During negotiations relating to a treaty on bilateral air links the Front, at the request of Suriname Airways, placed great emphasis on renewing the Air Traffic Treaty following its termination by Bouterse in 1983 (De Ware Tijd, 6-2-1989:1). To resume transatlantic services, SLM required a long-term lease of a DC-10 to replace the DC-8 which had crashed near Zanderij. KLM, however, was only willing to provide SLM with the required plane following the signing of the treaty. Yet Suriname was unable to sign since, according to the Dutch authorities, SLM could not pay the costs of an expensive short-term lease of a DC-10 from a third party. To complete this catch-22 situation, SLM was forced to undertake the expensive short-term lease as long as KLM refused to provide one of its own planes on a long-term basis (de Volkskrant, 2-10-1989:3). In the meantime, KLM seized the opportunity and captured the lion’s share on the Amsterdam-Paramaribo route.

These talks on the judicial and the Luchtvaartverdrag (Air Traffic Treaty)
clearly revealed The Hague’s unwillingness to cooperate with Paramaribo. Firstly the Lubbers cabinet demanded specific reforms aimed at restricting the military’s influence before it was willing to sign a new treaty and secondly, the Surinamese government was unable to come to an agreement with the Netherlands (despite intensive efforts throughout 1989) since SLM failed to pay the debts largely incurred as a result of the absence of a bilateral treaty on transatlantic air links. Only in the non-political and non-economic fields The Hague seemed willing to strengthen Dutch-Surinamese relations, with the signing of a treaty towards the end of 1990 encouraging cultural contacts between both nations (NRC Handelsblad, 6-10-1990:3).

Yet the main sign of Dutch reluctance to support Suriname became apparent during the annual negotiations about the allocation of aid. By restructuring CONS so as to promote direct talks between high-ranking officials from both nations, it was hoped that a decision could be made on the specific use of the Nƒ 200 million in annual assistance in a less formal setting. The first meeting was organized in March 1989; six senior staff members of the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation travelled to Paramaribo to negotiate with their Surinamese counterparts (De Ware Tijd, 14-3-1989:1).

Despite the relaxed atmosphere, before long the meeting was deadlocked. Although the officials agreed on a list of twenty projects identified by both parties as worth funding, Arron found the outcome of the first round unsatisfactory as these twenty projects first had to to be included in a MOP, which was then to be financed by The Hague through the RIB. Taking a slightly different tack, the Vice-President argued for direct funding since no MOP had yet been formulated (de Volkskrant, 19-5-1989:8). Unable to find a compromise, the Dutch delegation returned home, despite the previously allocated Nƒ 100 million for 1988 having been spent – and hence threatening to disrupt all ongoing development projects. Even though the Dutch strategy was intended to prevent corruption (with funds falling into the NL’s hands), Paramaribo’s argument that its own development experts were in a better position to assess where the aid should be invested, can certainly also be understood.

After two months of further negotiations, Bukman and Arron finally came to an agreement in July 1989 (De Ware Tijd, 13-7-1989:1-2). Since this new arrangement only broadly defined how the Nƒ 200 million was to be spent, it can be argued that this time the Netherlands had made the vital concession, particularly in view of Suriname still not having formulated a MOP. In addition, the Dutch had dropped their earlier insistence that the World Bank be consulted as an advisor to Suriname and, instead, had accepted Paramaribo’s wish to cooperate with the European Community in formulating a MOP. Suriname’s main concession had been to initiate peace negotiations with the warring factions. The Dutch argument for compromising, it must be noticed, had come about not due to an attitude change towards the Front,
but primarily due to the fear that the Republic’s economy would collapse. A shattered economy would have deprived the Netherlands of its strongest tool to influence Suriname’s domestic affairs, resulting in enormous social costs to both nations (de Volkskrant, 13-7-1989:1).

While the 1989 negotiations had been long and intense, discussions on financial aid for 1990 would prove yet more difficult, even though in the Netherlands Bukman had been replaced by Pronk following the installation of a CDA-PvdA coalition under the continued leadership of Lubbers in September 1989. Recognizing the prolonged talks of the previous year, Pronk invited representatives from both countries to meet in February 1990. Instead of Suriname having to hand in a MOP, Pronk considered it sufficient for the Front to formulate several less complex plans outlining the use of Dutch aid. The Dutch Minister ‘merely’ specified that Nf 135 million was to be allocated for educational and public health purposes, while the remainder was to be primarily invested in projects supporting rice farming, industrialization and the building sector. He also urged that the various projects be extended, at least to the value of Nf 25 million, to the war-torn countryside (NRC Handelsblad, 17-2-1990:3).

Despite these criteria, Pronk’s proposal was met with criticism, especially from the Dutch parliament, which only approved funds earmarked for educational and public health projects and refused to finance any other development schemes without a MOP (Het Parool, 23-3-1990:3). Pronk’s emotional warning that Paramaribo should be supported as otherwise ‘they [the military] will return’ fell on deaf ears (NRC Handelsblad, 15-3-1990:3). When in March 1990 Bouterse arrested Brunswijk during peace negotiations in Paramaribo (Het Parool, 27-3-1990:1), the House of Representatives stepped up its opposition to Suriname. The Dutch Ambassador was asked to submit a strong letter of protest, expressing The Hague’s concerns about Brunswijk’s arrest (NRC Handelsblad, 27-3-1990:3), while Pronk was forced to compromise somewhat on his earlier announcement. Although humanitarian assistance would continue, all other aid programmes were to be investigated in order to find out who would benefit from the funds and how these would strengthen the Republic’s democratic structures (NRC Handelsblad, 30-3-1990:2).

In his stand-off with the House of Representatives Pronk received support primarily from Minister of Foreign Affairs Van den Broek, who argued that the Surinamese government was not so much unwilling but rather unable to act against Brunswijk’s arrest, given the military’s strong domestic influence. The Front, on the other hand, did not realize the critical situation in the Dutch parliament. Instead of assisting Pronk and Van den Broek by lobbying Dutch parliamentarians directly, Paramaribo believed that once an agreement had been reached with Pronk, it was up to the Lubbers cabinet to see the aid package through the House of Representatives.
In April Shankar sent Lachmon to the Netherlands. During his stay, the senior statesman repeatedly asked Dutch politicians not to abandon Suriname but to assist the Republic in its efforts to develop stable political and socio-economic structures through the provision of financial and technical assistance (*Het Parool*, 7-4-1990:3). His efforts were clearly ‘too little too late’ since many parliamentarians felt a deep resentment towards Suriname, originating from the many corruption scandals under the pre-1980 Arron government and the fierce clashes with the various Bouterse regimes. As a result, by mid-May Pronk was willing to provide only Nƒ 2.6 million in humanitarian aid despite Suriname’s continued critical socio-economic situation (*NRC Handelsblad*, 17-5-1990:7).

Realizing that the overall aid programme was at stake, the Front coalition had little choice but to bow to the concerns expressed in the House of Representatives and to restrict the NL’s political influence. Subsequent reforms limited some of the military’s constitutional powers, particularly the right to carry out criminal investigations. Despite Bouterse’s aforementioned thinly veiled threats, these reforms were accepted in the Assembly with 36 against 6 votes on 1 May. In response, Dutch Minister of Justice Ernst Hirsch Ballin congratulated Shankar with having taken ‘a step in the right direction’ while crediting the decision with the possibility of finally renewing the treaty on judicial cooperation (*NRC Handelsblad*, 1-5-1990:3).

Despite these reforms and Lachmon’s earlier lobbying of members of the House of Representatives, The Hague was still unsatisfied with the developments in Suriname. To the Front’s dismay, on 27 June 1990 Pronk wrote a letter stating that Dutch parliamentarians would continue to refuse any release of funds without the formulation of a MOP (*NRC Handelsblad*, 12-7-1990:3). On 2 July Van den Broek informed the States General that he assessed recent reforms in Paramaribo insufficient as the military continued to enjoy a strong position (*Het Parool*, 2-7-1990:3).

This ongoing criticism of Suriname’s domestic affairs finally provoked an angry reaction from Arron. While acknowledging that The Hague had provided ‘support’ in 1989, Arron described the attitude of the Lubbers cabinet in 1990 as one of ‘restriction’ (*NRC Handelsblad*, 12-7-1990:3). He accused the Netherlands of contributing to the Republic’s political and socio-economic stagnation by withholding financial assistance. A few days later Lachmon was even more outspoken in his accusation of Dutch economic paternalism, now that ‘political paternalism is no longer possible’ (*NRC Handelsblad*, 18-7-1990:3) while dismissing the fear that Dutch money would end up with the military as unfair.

Arron’s and Lachmon’s frustration was understandable. The questioning of how the Republic’s political and socio-economic conditions would improve without the promised funds was legitimate. Similarly, their anger with the...
criticism voiced in the House of Representatives relating to the insufficiency of democratic reforms can well be understood, taking into account the need for the Assembly to introduce legal changes without antagonizing the officers. The example of Argentina, where throughout 1987 and 1988 sections of the military had provoked mutinies following President Raúl Alphonsín’s announcement that he would charge officers with human rights abuses (South America 1992:58), must have been on the minds of many Surinamese politicians. The Front’s restrained approach so as to avoid what would become known as the ‘Alphonsín effect’ (Sedoc-Dahlberg 1990:187) was not only characteristic of Suriname but also occurred in other Latin American countries. For example in Chile, where the Aylwin administration was likewise reluctant to prosecute former officers of the Pinochet junta (South America 1992:168).

Predictably, representatives from the larger Dutch parties (CDA, VVD and PvdA) as well as from the Development Cooperation Department rejected the criticism of senior Surinamese politicians. Pronk, in fact, soon had the opportunity to raise the issue personally as he travelled to Paramaribo in June 1990. During a meeting with Arron, Pronk rejected Surinamese accusations that The Hague was contributing to the Republic’s growing political and socio-economic instability. He pointed out that ‘first there must be a good economic policy before we give aid. Otherwise the money will be misspent’, while emphasizing the need for Suriname to establish a SAP, as agreed upon in concert with the European Community (NRC Handelsblad, 23-7-1990:3; Het Parool, 26-7-1990:3). The same message was repeated during subsequent talks with the President and representatives of Suriname’s industry and trade (NRC Handelsblad, 24-7-1990:1, 3).

Hence, Paramaribo increasingly felt the pressure of The Hague’s attempts to influence Suriname’s internal developments. Aware that Pronk was unlikely to change his position, the Front sought to reach a compromise. While Mungra made clear that he intended to substantially reduce the budget deficit, Arron acknowledged that ‘I do know that he [Pronk] is aware of Suriname’s problems and is kindly disposed towards the country’ (NRC Handelsblad, 24-7-1990:3). Despite these last minute gestures, the talks with the Dutch Minister must be judged as unsuccessful. Taking into consideration Paramaribo’s almost empty treasury, Schalkwijk (1994:186) commented as follows on the Pronk visit:

> It is clear that Suriname, pressurized by the lack of time, had to compromise and to a greater extent than before found itself under the supervision of the Dutch government. From the Dutch side time and time again various conditions were formulated for reinstating the aid. Conditions that varied with time.

Thus the Front blamed these new bilateral difficulties primarily on The Hague’s specific but shifting amendments with regard to the Aid Treaty,
including Van den Broek’s attempt to bring in new players such as the World Bank to oversee development projects in the Republic. Even though at the end of 1987 Van den Broek had announced no new conditions before funds would be made available, a few months later, during a visit to Paramaribo, he introduced the idea of aid internationalization. New demands had also been made by Bukman during his visits in May and July 1989 by requesting the Front not only to prepare a SAP but also to purchase Dutch-financed goods and services through the RIB. Half a year later it was Pronk’s turn: even though early in 1990 he had declared that plans for each socio-economic sector could be independently formulated, by the summer the House of Representatives had forced him again to insist on a MOP.

Since the Surinamese authorities were often either unable to respond to the shifting Dutch position or too late or half-hearted in implementing the requests, The Hague repeatedly threatened to reduce the so urgently needed funds. The situation was exacerbated by the Netherlands putting additional and considerable pressure on Paramaribo with regard to a variety of non-aid related issues, including ending the civil war, reducing the officers’ political influence, strengthening the democratic structures and combating drug trafficking. Again, The Hague warned Paramaribo that a failure to implement these demands would put aid at risk.

The following table illustrates the restricted Dutch aid payments to the Front compared with the financial assistance made available to cabinets in the pre-December Murders era. Whereas, with the exception of 1978, the Netherlands had provided on average over Nf 150 million in annual aid between 1975 and 1982, funds were made accessible in a less generous fashion after 1987. In 1988 a mere Nf 6 million was received, rising to Nf 83 million in 1989 before falling to Nf 66 million in 1990 – a far cry from the Nf 200 million in annual aid agreed upon at an earlier stage.

With the continual reduction in the flow of funds, the Front coalition became increasingly frustrated with The Hague. After Arron’s outburst in July, the usually imperturbable Shankar followed the path of the Vice-President by ‘welcoming’ the new Dutch Ambassador Pieter Koch in September 1990 with a critical message:

Not only the government, but also parliament has indicated that we must hold on to a strict execution of the Aid Treaty. We thus lament being confronted with a continuous spectrum of conditions with regard to the Treaty’s execution. […] We are convinced that among friendly nations there is an understanding of our idea of sovereignty, which rejects paternalism and an intervention in domestic affairs. Principles which form the basis of international organizations of which we are a member. (Schalkwijk 1994:202-3.)
Surinamese dissatisfaction was also reflected during discussions in the Assembly in November 1990 on the usefulness of sending a delegation to The Hague (NRC Handelsblad, 9-11-1990:7). Later that month, following yet another shift in Dutch demands – this time The Hague withdrew the requirement of formulating a MOP, demanding instead a Toekomstvisie (Future Vision), a plan outlining the long-term objectives and processes of the development projects – plans to visit the Netherlands were cancelled (NRC Handelsblad, 16-11-1990:7). The intense level of anger felt in Paramaribo became clear in Mungra’s threat to take the Netherlands to the International Court of Justice in an attempt to force The Hague to continue supplying aid as agreed in the treaty (NRC Handelsblad, 21-11-1990:3).

Realizing the sharp escalation in the conflict and recognizing the Republic’s weak bargaining position, Arron and Lachmon sought to defuse bilateral tensions. On 21 November, in a more conciliatory tone, Arron declared: ‘I will not make the mistake of completely closing the door on the Netherlands. I will continue to follow the path of reminding the Netherlands to fulfil its commitments resulting from the 1975 treaty’ (NRC Handelsblad, 21-11-1990:3). Lachmon even travelled to The Hague at the end of November to personally talk with Lubbers, Pronk and Van den Broek.

Disappointingly, during these talks both sides simply reaffirmed their
opposing positions. Whereas the Netherlands made it clear that aid would not be provided without being informed about the specific use of the funds, Suriname continued to hesitate about formulating a detailed MOP or alternative plans outlining the allocation of Dutch money. This stalemate led Arron to warn The Hague that ‘developments are being created that will have such large consequences that the Netherlands can easily say that it will once again discontinue development payments’ (NRC Handelsblad, 19-11-1990:3).

The Christmas coup

Arron’s warning would turn into a sad reality only four weeks later. During the closing days of 1990 the situation in Suriname became critical. The stalemate with the Netherlands forced Shankar to announce a revision of the Constitution. Primarily in a bid to satisfy Dutch demands to restrict the military’s role in politics, the President asked for a national dialogue in which ‘we, who have stayed behind here, must have the courage to ask ourselves what went wrong’ (NRC Handelsblad, 27-11-1990:7). He also urged the Netherlands to stay calm: ‘We should not be afraid of confrontations, as long as these occur within the bounds of decency, as defined by a civilized society’ (NRC Handelsblad, 27-11-1990:7). Although the officers did not react publicly to the President’s speech, their anger about further restrictions of their constitutional rights were rising to dangerous levels.

In the socio-economic sphere the situation also remained fragile. One example was the announcement in November 1990 by the Melkcentrale (Central Milk Agency) that it would stop the sale of milk, except for infants and the elderly, whose consumption could be met by local production (NRC Handelsblad, 28-11-1990:7). The Milk Agency, responsible for the milk distribution in the country, was forced to take this measure due to a shortfall in foreign exchange reserves combined with a delayed shipment of milk powder. Similar problems were experienced in the educational sector as many teachers failed to return from their holidays in the Netherlands, while books and other teaching materials were becoming increasingly scarce (NRC Handelsblad, 29-11-1990:7).

These widespread difficulties were soon reflected in parliamentary debates, where sharp criticism of the cabinet’s policies was voiced. Indeed, several ministers warned that they would not support the budget for 1991; a warning countered by Arron with the threat to resign (NRC Handelsblad, 30-11-1990:3). This in turn led the military to believe that large sections of the population were looking for an alternative to the ruling coalition.

The final straw came when Bouterse felt unfairly treated by Dutch authorities after having been prevented from leaving the transit lounge at Schiphol. In December 1990, on an extensive overseas trip which had been endorsed by
the government, Bouterse had to travel via Amsterdam – Schiphol being Suriname’s aviation gateway – to reach his first destination Ghana. During his stopover the Dutch Ministry of Justice had ordered Bouterse to remain in the transit area for ‘security reasons’, thus preventing him from speaking to the media or meeting relatives (NRC Handelsblad, 12-12-1990:2). The same procedure was repeated a few days later on another transit stop before leaving for Switzerland and once again on Bouterse’s return to Suriname, although in the meantime he had applied for a visa (NRC Handelsblad, 14-12-1990:2).

Bouterse’s outrage was all the greater as the Front failed to issue any protest, even though Shankar had travelled to Amsterdam for an official state visit on the same plane. Bouterse was so furious that, on his return, he bitterly attacked Shankar at a press conference.

If I would be President of Suriname and was sitting in the same airplane as the Commander… and I should learn of the treatment to the Commander of the country of which I was President, I would have turned Schiphol upside down, this would not have happened (NRC Handelsblad, 24-12-1990:1).

He also was incensed that Shankar had been kept waiting outside Lubbers’ office where the media took photos of the President ‘lingering’ in the rain. Bouterse argued that ‘a President should not wait anywhere. Such a photo in a Dutch newspaper is a disgrace both for our President and for our country and people’ (NRC Handelsblad, 14-12-1990:2). The military strongman publicly called Shankar a ‘joker’ and ‘a man without pride, without honour, without dignity’ (NRC Handelsblad, 24-12-1990:1).

Tensions between the government and the military escalated the following day as Bouterse resigned as Commander – although not as Chairman of the Military Council. The NRC Handelsblad (24-12-1990:3), commenting on this latest development, adopted a minatory tone because

with this step Bouterse has made it even more difficult for the government to control the army than before. The army is no longer under [government] command, because it is highly unlikely that the government will find an officer who is capable of bringing the vultures in that army to heel and who will want or be able to be in command of an army in which the former strongman Bouterse remains an officer.

Even though Graanoogst, taking over command, assured the government that ‘the National Army with an unfailing sense of responsibility will continue to fulfil its constitutional tasks’, before long there were speculations about another coup (NRC Handelsblad, 24-12-1990:3).

After Bouterse’s resignation Shankar called an emergency meeting of the cabinet (Dew 1994:181) but, as suspected, the government was unable to
assert control over the officers. While Lachmon, Arron and several ministers
were still debating the crisis, in the Presidential Palace late on Christmas Eve,
Shankar received a telephone call from officer Mijnals, who simply told the
President: ‘The armed forces have taken over the government of the Republic
of Suriname. Do not create any problems. Prevent an escalation and go home
quietly’ (NRC Handelsblad, 27-12-1990:1). Half an hour later, Graanoogst went
on television to inform the public of the coup and to assure the people that the
Constitution and Assembly would be respected as they had been following
the coup of February 1980, as long as the parliamentarians accepted the
cabinet’s ‘resignation’ (Het Parool, 27-12-1990:1).

Graanoogst justified the coup by pointing at Article 178 of the 1987
Constitution,10 which the civilian politicians did not object to although the
assumption of the country being in danger could not be validated. The civil
war, the Republic’s involvement in the global drug trade, the ongoing abuses
of human rights, the increased socio-economic difficulties and the problematic
Dutch-Surinamese relations may have been reasons to criticize the Front, but
it was first and foremost the military that had pushed the government into
this difficult position.

The Kerst- or Telefooncoup (Christmas or Telephone Coup), as the military
intervention became known, was implemented without a shot being fired and
with the public and politicians generally acquiescing in the officers’ action.
Hardly any soldiers could be seen on Paramaribo’s streets and life continued
its normal routine. The government handed in its resignation as demanded
by Graanoogst, cooperated with the military and even agreed to remain in
power until a caretaker cabinet would be formed. In fact, a few days after the
coup, a senior politician described the situation as follows: ‘What has been
announced by the army as a coup has thereafter been channelled within the
Constitution’ (NRC Handelsblad, 28-12-1990:1). Similarly, Lachmon attempted
to calm domestic and international anxiety by stating that ‘it all remains
within [the bounds of] the Constitution’ (NRC Handelsblad, 28-12-1990:3).

In other words, both the military and the Front portrayed the Christmas
Coup simply as a change of government within the constitutional framework.
As expected, during subsequent debates in the Assembly, some ministers even
admitted that the government had largely failed to achieve its objectives and
that Suriname had degenerated into an unruly country (NRC Handelsblad, 29-
12-1990:3). As attempts, at the peak of the crisis early in December, to reshuffle
the cabinet had been largely unsuccessful due to Arron’s opposition,11 many

10 Articles 177-178 specify the creation and duties of the Military Authority, see Chapter VI.
11 The Vice-President feared that the VHP in particular would gain through such a move since
primarily Hindustani shopkeepers had profited from the high prices on goods and services in
recent years. This new financial wealth, as Arron believed, might be translated into growing poli-
tical power.
politicians as well as the public saw the coup as paving the way for new elections (Dew 1994:181).

General concern about the military’s actions eased as Bouterse ‘suggested’ the Assembly elect a civilian to the presidency. On 29 December parliament ‘accepted’ this proposal and elected Johan Kraag, a 77 year old Creole, to be President. In the late 1950s Kraag had served as a parliamentary leader of the NPS, had chaired the Staten until 1963 and had been Minister of Social Affairs in the Pengel government (NRC Handelsblad, 31-12-1990:3). His multi-ethnic cabinet included one other NPS member, a few politicians from minor parties without previous representation in the Assembly (Het Parool, 8-1-1991:5) as well as some senior civil servants, including Ronnie Ramlakhan from the Foreign Affairs Department, who was appointed Foreign Minister (NRC Handelsblad, 7-1-1991:3).

The Front justifi ed its support for this new cabinet ‘because it has to organize elections and because we do not want the country to slide down any further’ (NRC Handelsblad, 7-1-1991:3). In other words, the NPS, VHP and KTPI cooperated in the process of transferring power given that new elections would soon be held. Indeed, Bouterse accepted this condition and announced the inauguration of a new government within one hundred days. On 7 January 1991 free and fair elections were to be organized. However, this time frame was later ‘extended’ to 150 days to avoid the elections taking place during the Muslim holiday of Ramadan (NRC Handelsblad, 5-1-1991:2).

Nevertheless, right from the beginning it was obvious that the military remained firmly in control of the caretaker cabinet. Of the eleven ministers, three were members of the NDP and several were closely linked to the NL (NRC Handelsblad, 7-1-1991:3). Moreover, the main centre of power was vested in Vice-President Wijdenbosch (Dew 1994:182). Aware of the military influence on the new government, various civilian politicians decided to boycott the Assembly session in which Kraag and Wijdenbosch were elected to their offices. The number of absentees, however, was too low to stop the proceedings, primarily because Lachmon had appealed to all parliamentarians to ‘legitimize’ the coup or otherwise face the loss of control over Suriname’s development (NRC Handelsblad, 31-12-1990:3). Another sign of the military’s re-emerging power was Kraag’s first decree calling for the reinstatement of Bouterse as Commander-in-Chief (NRC Handelsblad, 31-12-1990:3).

Whereas it was relatively easy for Bouterse to force the acceptance of the coup on the domestic front, it was extremely difficult to quell the protests from the international community. The first and harshest condemnation came from the Netherlands. Shortly after the announcement of Shankar’s overthrow, Surinamese leaders residing in the Netherlands and opposing to military rule called on Lubbers to send in Dutch marines during a live television debate to which Bouterse was linked via satellite (Haakmat 1996:40).
Lubbers rejected this idea, on 25 December Van den Broek ordered Suriname’s Ambassador to the Foreign Affairs Department and handed him a diplomatic letter forcefully condemning the coup. The letter also stated that The Hague ‘deeply regretted that with this [coup] the consolidation of the democratic order in Suriname has been given a heavy blow’ (NRC Handelsblad, 27-12-1990:1). In addition, Finance Minister Mungra was told that once again Dutch aid had been suspended and that the Lubbers cabinet was considering further measures to oppose the new regime.

The Netherlands was not the only country reacting. Immediate protest was received from France, calling upon Bouterse to reinstate the civilian government (NRC Handelsblad, 27-12-1990:3). Similarly, on Boxing Day, the State Department issued a declaration asserting that

this act, at a time when the entire hemisphere is moving in the direction of democracy, will only isolate Suriname further from the international community, to the detriment of the Surinamese people. We call on the Surinamese military to immediately return the power to the democratically elected authorities of that country.

Washington also decided to suspend the three week old agreement granting Suriname credit of US$ 15 million for the purchase of food. Furthermore, the State Department urged American citizens to avoid travelling to the Republic due to the unstable domestic situation (NRC Handelsblad, 2-1-1991:1, 16-2-1991:2).

More disconcerting to the new regime was the reaction from Latin American and Caribbean countries. At the request of Venezuela, the OAS discussed the situation in Suriname at a meeting in Washington on 28 December, where the member states unanimously condemned the coup and demanded a return to democracy (NRC Handelsblad, 29-12-1990:1). Similarly, CARICOM sharply repudiated Shankar’s overthrow and threatened to cancel Paramaribo’s observer status. Much of the progress made by the successive Bouterse regimes to integrate the Republic into the region was thus annihilated, ironically through the actions taken by the same officers responsible for improving relations with Latin America and the Caribbean at an earlier stage.

The frustration in the region was clearly illustrated by Venezuela’s reaction. Caracas was not content to just call on the OAS to discuss the coup, it also threatened to lobby the organization to take further measures should the military fail to hold free and fair elections within the designated time. Venezuela deemed the situation so grave that it cancelled all aid programmes. The most drastic step, however, was the decision to recall the Venezuelan Ambassador from Paramaribo. President Pérez, a personal friend of Arron, denounced the coup as a ‘deep insult to the dignity of the whole of America’ and threatened that Venezuela might take additional actions ‘against this
disgraceful military coup which once again opens the chapter of military dictatorships’ (*NRC Handelsblad*, 2-1-1991:1).

The Wijdenbosch regime was overwhelmed by this strong international criticism. It remained silent for weeks, merely pointing out to Washington that the cancellation of credit to buy food might soon result in a greater shortage of bread and milk (*NRC Handelsblad*, 2-1-1991:1). Only in January did the new Foreign Minister recall his Ambassadors from The Hague and Washington (Ramkisor and Udenhout), along with its Consul General from Miami (Dick de Bie), to consider Suriname’s diplomatic response and the possibility of making new appointments to overseas missions (*NRC Handelsblad*, 16-1-1991:2). And it was not until April that Ramlakhan sent representatives to several Caribbean countries to stop the ‘smear campaigns’ against Suriname (*NRC Handelsblad*, 18-5-1991:3). His assessment that ‘these missions were not without success’ was greeted with laughter by the foreign diplomatic corps in Paramaribo (*NRC Handelsblad*, 18-5-1991:3).

The return to democracy in November 1987 did not usher in the stability Suriname was hoping to gain. Political tensions soon emerged between the government and the military about the NL’s constitutional rights. In the socio-economic sphere no improvement was recognizable, primarily due to the devastating effect of the ongoing civil war. To make matters worse, the officers’ continued involvement in drug trafficking and human rights violations undermined the internal and external standing of the new civilian administration even more deeply. Since international aid was now reduced to a trickle, Paramaribo expected that The Hague would help solve the various problems by granting considerable financial and technical assistance. However, this expectation remained unfulfilled since the Netherlands refused to support the government until the very same problems Paramaribo hoped to overcome with Dutch assistance, were resolved. In doing so, The Hague contributed significantly to the undermining of the Front’s ability to govern and to increasing the tension between the cabinet and the NL. In other words, for most of the post-election period the country seemed to go around in circles, until the internal and external situation had deteriorated to such an extent that, on Christmas Day 1990, the military once again decided to overthrow the elected government.