



Jamaicans Seek Shalom

IN THIS ISSUE

- 4 Jamaicans For Justice:
Pursuing a More
Just Society,**
by Marilyn Delevante
- 6 Statement by Jamaicans
United Against
Police Brutality**
- 7 Dance with Disaster,**
by Roger Neill
- 10 Toward Accountability and
Respect: Building a Culture
of Peace in Jamaica,**
by Bruce Guenther

As you fly away from the postcard backdrop of Montego Bay you are already making plans to come back. What a country. What a paradise!

Paradise in Jamaica?

by Ron Good

You drop out of the early morning sky approaching Montego Bay in a brightly colored Air Jamaica Airbus packed with hundreds of other vacationers and you think you are landing in Paradise. And you may well be.

Below, the waters of the Caribbean Sea are a crystal clear azure and turquoise and the nearby mountains with their lush growth and flowering trees provide a verdant contrast. As you disembark from the plane you are hit with a gust of warm tropical breeze and you can hardly wait to get to the beachside hotel where you are going to spend a glorious two weeks having fun in the sun and sand.

As you make your way through the airport you are greeted with brightly costumed singers gleefully greeting you with traditional Jamaican folk songs. You pass through customs, are loaded onto an air-conditioned bus, and are whisked off to your all-inclusive hotel, where all your needs and desires will be catered to for the next fortnight.

Once inside the walled perimeter of the hotel everything is strictly “No problem, mon.” At no time during your vacation will you have to leave the friendly confines of your regal refuge, as everything your heart desires or imagines is available at your fingertips.

You have total access to the private beach with its clean white sands, exquisite snorkeling, and an endless variety of water activities. Your palate is never wanting as an endless array of fruits, vegetables (most

brought in on the same plane from Miami), and extravagant dishes is laid out for the taking upon demand any hour of the day.

You need a haircut, require emergency health care, want to go on a shopping spree for “local” arts and crafts, enjoy some reggae music, or otherwise get a “taste of the culture”? It is all provided by the kind and courteous staff of the well-protected (and guarded) resort your travel agent so wisely recommended.

When it is time to leave, you do so with a nostalgic reluctance. You have never experienced such a pampered and relaxing holiday. It has been everything you ever dreamed of, and well worth the expense.

You are glad you paid no mind to the negative reports flying over the Internet about how “dangerous” Jamaica is. That certainly has not been your experience. The people you have met (employees of the hotel) have all been friendly, and apparently happy and content. As you fly away from the postcard backdrop of Montego Bay you are already making plans to come back. What a country. What a paradise!

Reality Check

When most people think of Jamaica this is the scenario that plays in their mind. And for most of the foreigners that visit the island this is, in fact, their reality. But for the average Jamaican, life is much different. Outside those fenced compounds where nothing is lacking and all is well, life is much less sure, much less optimistic, and

In the years since independence, the Jamaican murder rate has increased at a steady and alarming rate until last year, when it reached a peak of approximately 1,150 people murdered, with about 150 additional citizens killed by the police.

[T]he current prime minister and his party have on different occasions said that politics is about “who gets what, when and how,” and that Jamaican politics is “the fight over scarce benefits and spoils in which hostile tribes are perpetually at war.”

much less peaceful. Thanks to the deceptive façade that proximity to North America affords in “first world” materialism, very few people outside the island, or without Jamaican roots, understand how far removed the travel brochure myth is from the reality.

This year Jamaica celebrates 40 years of independence. In a recent poll the citizens were asked to respond to the question of whether they were better off now than during colonial times. More than half of the respondents indicated that life under the former British rule was preferable, offering more opportunity and ensuring a better quality of life.

How can this be? The answer most often espoused by Jamaican historical theorists and social commentators is that what took place in August 1962 was not independence but a transfer of power from one chosen few to another. And whereas it was in the best colonial interests of the former elite to maintain order and ensure growth and prosperity on the island, the present holders of power do so purely for their own gain.

Basic to this argument is the recognition that the Jamaican constitution is a document that could best be described as protecting the interests of the ruling parties and not the welfare and rights of the citizens. Drawn up by the early representatives of the two political parties (each of which was founded and headed by a member of the same extended family), the document allows for just several paragraphs outlining the Jamaican citizens’ rights. This is followed by literally tens of pages of circumstances, variations, and exceptions under which those rights can be abrogated in favor of the desires of the state. At its very core, Jamaica as a nation has little institutional respect for the basic human rights of the individual.

Corruption and Violence

This is manifested in many forms. It is nowhere more obvious, however, than in the culture of corruption and violence that seems to permeate almost every sector of Jamaican society, leaving a trail of fear and suspicion. In the years since independence, the Jamaican murder rate has increased at a steady and alarming rate until last year, when it reached a peak of approximately 1,150 people murdered, with about 150 additional citizens killed by the police. Add to these figures the one-a-day death rate on

the nation’s highways caused by what could be best described as “criminal negligence” and you have an astonishing incidence of mortal violence taking place on this island of less than 3 million people.

Analyses by Amnesty International and other reporting groups indicate that in terms of the murder rate and numbers of extrajudicial police killings, Jamaica ranks in the top five worldwide. (By comparison, a *Time* magazine article recently lamented the murder rate in Argentina, which was around 40,000 in a country with a population of 160 million—a 1:4000 ratio. Jamaica’s ratio is 1:3000, or worse.)

The reasons for this prevalence of violence are likely many and complex. Some describe it as the ultimate legacy of slavery, the end result of a system built on brutality, mistrust, and a total disregard for human dignity. While many pundits and political analysts acknowledge this historical influence, most point to the pervasive corruption in politics and governance in recent times as being the force most responsible for the current state of affairs.

Particularly since the late 1940s, when Jamaica was on the eve of that 1962 independence, and to the present, practically every aspect of national life and policy has been determined by the self-serving whims of a powerful few political leaders. Giving credence to this notion, the current prime minister and his party have on different occasions said that politics is about “who gets what, when and how,” and that Jamaican politics is “the fight over scarce benefits and spoils in which hostile tribes are perpetually at war.”

In an environment where personal gain, and not the country’s best interest, is the main motivation for leadership, the end result is a society of violence and corruption. In Jamaica, voting constituencies are often referred to as “garrisons” because political representatives maintain their hold on power through a combination of community largesse and criminal activities, including extortion, drug trafficking, and dealing in arms.

The line between politician and gangster is so blurred that many who gained wealth and community support through illegal means yesterday are today’s political representatives. And because of the pervasive impact in recent years of illegal drugs and the proliferation of guns, many of today’s “dons” wield more power and influence

than the politicians. All in all, it is a situation where the leadership, both official and informal, have engendered a cynical disregard for law and order, peace and justice, and the sanctity of human rights.

It is not that the issues of crime and violence are not of major concern to most Jamaicans, including those in power. They obviously pose a threat to the success of everyone's pursuits. The response of the governments over the years has been to institute a series of gradually more repressive "get tough" policies through the formation of "special" police units, each given broader and more severe powers.

Presently the nation is living under the influence of the Crime Management Unit, led by an infamous police officer who has repeatedly shown no hesitation to "shoot first, ask questions last." While his public statements indicate that a Jamaican's basic constitutional rights are "merely semantics" and that human rights groups are aiding and abetting gunmen, criminals, and terrorists, polls indicate that he enjoys a two-thirds approval rating by the general population.

As in many places around the world, fear for personal safety and security has led many Jamaicans to be willing to be less protective of human rights. Hence, this Crime Management Unit carries on its business, often in a most brutal manner, with total impunity and no fear of accountability. It is the tacit approval and acceptance of these types of activities by the government and the public at large that have led one long-time human rights lawyer to lament that Jamaica is "a heartbeat away from being a police state."

Hope on the Horizon

There are signs of hope on the horizon. The recent upsurge in corruption, violence, and police brutality has drawn the attention of international human rights groups like Amnesty International and Transparency International. Both have become pariahs and embarrassments to the government, which is extremely sensitive to international opinion and image. Regardless of how impotent the outrage, bad press on human rights and corruption is bad for business.

The really encouraging signs, however, are movements within the country itself. The Independent Jamaica Council for Human Rights (IJCHR), which has officially been in existence for some 30 years, though rather inactive, reorganized itself in 1998 and has become a very active and visible

force. Its main focus has been advocacy for inmates on death row and the abolition of the death penalty, but in recent years the group has also taken on the cause of the mentally ill who have been incarcerated for long periods of time (sometimes decades), denied judicial process, and basically forgotten. MCC, through its partnering work with the mentally ill and in the prisons, has been able to provide meaningful support to the efforts of the IJCHR.

A more recently formed group that has had an impact on the human rights and justice landscape is Jamaicans For Justice (JFJ). This three-year-old citizens' watchdog group has been able to forge an alliance of committed people from all strata of Jamaican society and has become the most visible and outspoken voice for human rights and against police brutality. In addition, many of its efforts are directed toward education and consciousness raising in the form of legislative lobbying and community seminars and forums.

JFJ's respect and influence have been manifest in a number of successful court challenges and changes in government policies. What it has accomplished in a short period of time is truly remarkable. MCC volunteers have supported JFJ in the form of administrative assistance.

Outlook

The hope for an immediate improvement in the respect for human rights in Jamaica is uncertain at best. Though the country is on the verge of a national election, the political differences of those seeking election are indistinguishable. The recent history of widespread corruption in government and the growing menace of the international trade in drugs and guns, which strongly influences the Jamaican economy and social dynamics, make the struggle for true law and order a formidable one indeed.

The prospect for improved opportunities and quality of life seems a distant hope for many as the economy continues in a downward spiral and social institutions such as education and health services wallow in a quagmire of corruption and mismanagement. Public attitudes toward the mentally ill, disabled, and less fortunate need to be

Jamaica National Anthem

Eternal Father bless our land,
Guide us with thy mighty hand,
Keep us free from evil powers,
Be our light thro' countless hours.
To our leaders, Great Defender,
Grant true wisdom from above.

Teach us true respect for all,
Stir response to duty's call.
Strengthen us the weak to cherish,
Give us vision lest we perish,
Knowledge send us Heavenly Father,
Grant true wisdom from above.

Refrain
Justice, truth be ours forever,
Jamaica land we love.
Jamaica, Jamaica,
Jamaica land we love.

Jamaicans For Justice's respect and influence have been manifest in a number of successful court challenges and changes in government policies. What it has accomplished in a short period of time is truly remarkable.

continually challenged. The government's shortsighted and Draconian approach to solving "the crime problem" will surely lead to a continuing abuse of human rights with little lessening of crime.

But through it all, Jamaicans are a resilient people, and the hope of a more peaceful nation still burns in the hearts and minds of many. Some have taken bold and coura-

geous steps in the face of real personal danger to bring to fruition that vision of peace and justice. The struggle continues and MCC is privileged to be part of it. One day Jamaica may, indeed, be a paradise for more than just the occasional visitor.

Ron Good is MCC Jamaica country co-representative.

Jamaicans For Justice: Pursuing a More Just Society

by Marilyn Delevante

In 1999 tensions were high in Kingston, Jamaica, when the government imposed an increase in the price of gasoline. Certain sections of the city erupted as roadblocks of burning tires were set up and in some places riots ensued.

After the three days of protest some members of the middle and privileged classes met to voice their concerns about the direction in which their beloved country was headed and the lack of a voice for the citizens outside of the protest demonstration. In a nearby church hall a small group of citizens met; out of that meeting, Jamaicans For Justice (JFJ) was born.

In just three years of dedicated work, gratefully and thankfully assisted by Mennonite

Central Committee, JFJ has become a respected and recognized voice that consistently proclaims the value of human life and the need for social change in Jamaica. To date the organization has been extremely successful and, in its short lifetime, has received one local and two international awards.

The material following this paragraph was originally published as an article in Jamaica's national newspaper, the *Daily Gleaner*. It was published during a time when human rights organizations such as Jamaicans For Justice were being accused of being supporters of criminals. It was suggested by some that human rights advocacy was an invitation to kill policemen and -women. As the article correctly states, JFJ's challenge is to continue demanding acknowledgment of the inherent dignity and value of each and every citizen and to uphold the concept of innocence until proved guilty in a court of law.

On one level, Jamaicans For Justice can be said to have brought to the public's attention the plight of many Jamaicans who have, in one way or another, suffered an injustice. On another level the organization has held out a helping hand to hundreds of citizens who feel that they or a family member has been wronged, and have approached JFJ for guidance, advice, and moral support.

However, it is on an entirely different and perhaps more significant level that much of the work of JFJ is concerned as it deals with encouraging a fundamental change in the thinking of the society that, in the long run, will make a difference to the kind of lives Jamaican citizens lead.

Jamaicans For Justice Receives Weimar Human Rights Award

The human rights lobby group Jamaicans For Justice has been awarded the prestigious Weimar Human Rights Award from the city of Weimar, Germany. The award will be presented to JFJ's chairperson in Weimar on International Human Rights Day, December 10, 2002. The purpose of Weimar's Human Rights Award is to help protect and promote human rights defenders.

The city of Weimar, Germany, is very famous, beautiful, and historic. Famous literary personalities like Goethe, Schiller, and Wieland added to its fame. But not far away from the city centre is the extermination camp of Buchenwald. It is there that the Nazis killed thousands of people, including women and children in a terrible plan to exterminate the Jewish people. By its Human Rights Award the city of Weimar sends a proclamation to the peoples and governments of this world to co-operate in the support and protection of human rights and demonstrates its historical consciousness and support for persons who engage in the protection of human rights.

Jamaicans For Justice is honoured to have been awarded such a prestigious international award. The award has been previously given to persons such as Father Walter Shilling of Germany together with Mayor Selim Belagic of Tuzla, Bosnia, in 1995, Dr. Luis Guillermo Pérez Casas in 1996, and most recently Ms. Shahnaz Bokhari of Pakistan in 2001. It is a great encouragement to the organization and is an acknowledgement that our quest to ensure that the rights of all Jamaicans are respected and upheld equally, and our call for transparency and accountability and an end to the abuse of Jamaicans by the state, has not gone unnoticed.

—Jamaicans For Justice press release

JFJ membership is made up of a group of citizens with a very clear idea of what justice means. Members of JFJ are determined that sooner or later, Jamaica will dispense justice evenly and equally to all its citizens.

The Michael Gayle Case

Jamaicans For Justice has become identified with three incidents that occurred shortly after its inception and it is just possible that without its intervention these incidents may never have been heard of and by now be long forgotten. Jenny Campbell asked JFJ for help after her mentally ill son Michael Gayle was brutally murdered by the security forces and her cause was immediately taken up. This case went to a Coroner's Court, where the jury found that the members of the security forces present at the roadblock that night should be charged with manslaughter.

It was therefore with disbelief and disappointment that JFJ greeted the news that the Director of Public Prosecution would not be charging anyone with the death of Michael Gayle.

Historically, this may very well have been the end of the matter and Michael Gayle's death would have become just another statistic. However, JFJ does not give up so easily and has successfully presented a petition in the case of Michael Gayle's death to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which petition asks the IACHR to find that the government of Jamaica has illegally deprived Michael Gayle of his right to life. This is the first time that a petition of this nature has been made on behalf of a Jamaican victim, and is a landmark in human rights activity in this country.

Montego Bay Street People

A second incident that received national attention was the plight of 34 mentally ill street people who were illegally removed from Montego Bay in the middle of the night of July 14–15, 1999, and dumped miles away, in St. Elizabeth. It was initially brought to the nation's attention by JFJ's Montego Bay chapter through the voices of outrage from Elizabeth Hall and Joy Crooks, both of whom are members of JFJ and also work for the Committee for the Upliftment of the Mentally Ill.

In spite of the government's initial refusal to hold an enquiry, the authorities had to bow to intense lobbying pressure brought by JFJ and other civil groups. Eventually a commission of enquiry was held and legal counsel was provided, through the efforts of JFJ, to act on behalf of the victims.

One year after the incident, members of the Montego Bay chapter of JFJ reenacted this shameful event in an effort to bring the reality of the abuse home to the nation and ensure that this shameful event not be forgotten.

Illegal Detention

The third incident, perhaps not so widely known, is that of the treatment of over 50 persons (mostly young men) from the Grants Pen area who were taken to the Constant Spring Police Station and illegally detained, photographed, and fingerprinted without being charged with any crime or misdemeanor. JFJ successfully took this case to court, and all of the 13 victims who came forward and made statements, were granted monetary compensation.

Another landmark achievement by the organization was when JFJ took the Sole Commissioner of the Commission of Enquiry into the beating of hundreds of prisoners in the St. Catherine District Prison to court when he would not permit members to take notes. JFJ won this case, paving the way for the public to freely take notes during commissions of enquiry. Recently Parliament also relaxed its "convention" not to allow note-taking by citizens sitting in the public gallery while Parliament was in session.

The above examples, none of them earth shattering, are not insignificant, and illustrate what can be done by a dedicated group, operating in a legal and peaceful manner, to highlight, educate, and defend any and all citizens' human rights. Far from "supporting criminals," JFJ is trying to ensure that everyone, including agents of the state, uphold the law and JFJ is committed to supporting all attempts to create a civilized, just, and prosperous society.

Marilyn Delevante is a member of the communication/education committee of Jamaicans For Justice.

There can be no peace if there is no justice.

—Comment by the Honorable Hensley Wolfe, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Jamaica, summing up his experience chairing a panel studying recent civil unrest in Jamaica

Jamaicans For Justice . . . [has] brought to the public's attention the plight of many Jamaicans who have . . . suffered an injustice. . . [JFJ] has held out a helping hand to hundreds of citizens who feel that they or a family member has been wronged.

What About Jamaica?

How to speak the land of my birth?
What tongue to choose?

The tongue of history.

Of hate and hurt and burning lash
Of fight and fire
 embers under baking sun
Of sweet white-gold of sugar
Of bitter gall of slavery
 holding all in thrall
Of rich flavours of resistance
 jerking the taste buds
Of fruity celebration
 "August mawnin" sweet
like Star-Apple
Staining the tongue with tomorrow's
 memories
Shall I choose the tongue of
 Paradise?

White sand and blue-green-
aquamarine water and cloudless
sky and gentle breeze. Mountain
time and evening time and play-
time, "ring ding" time and "no
problem man" lying under coconut
tree dahling.

Shall I choose the tongue of
 dreams?

"Out of many, one people"
 Our motto
"Justice, truth be ours for ever"
 Our anthem
"One love, one heart"
The world's song
"This is my island in the sun"
 Redemption Song?

Statement by Jamaicans United Against Police Brutality

Despite a claim by the Jamaican constitution that citizens are presumed innocent until proven guilty, events in recent weeks have confirmed the experience of many Jamaicans that what obtains in practice is that one is guilty if so accused by the police until proven innocent.

The reminder of this ugly fact was none other than senior police officer Reneto Adams, head of the Crime Management Unit (CMU). The CMU, it should be recalled, was set up by the prime minister to fight crime but is now a proven death squad and purveyor of terror within inner city communities.

Adams shocked Jamaicans with his bold claim that the concept of being innocent until proven guilty was mere "semantics." He accused the United Nations, Amnesty International and local human rights groups of being set up to protect criminals. He went on to claim that 70 percent of Jamaicans are involved in some kind of criminal activity.

Given Adams's notorious reputation, his involvement in the killing of seven youths at a house in Braeton last year (now before a coroner's court) and his involvement in last year's killing of 25 people in Western Kingston (a videotape shows him casually firing his high-powered rifle into a populated area), and involvement in other notorious cases of extrajudicial killings (Punkie on Jacques Road), one would have thought that such comments would be cause for some form of embarrassment or concern within the government.

But true to form there was no official response from the government. The minister of national security declined on a television program to make any comment. The police commissioner made no official response except when pressed to try and rationalize Adams's statements.

In the interim police killings have continued at their normal pace of 150 per year. The latest police killing is that of a seven-year-old boy in the Lawrence Tavern area of Kingston. The police claim as usual that they were returning fire and the boy got killed in the crossfire. As is the case in almost all police shootings the residents tell

a completely different story, i.e., that there was no shootout, that the police fired their guns indiscriminately. The residents suggest that the police were trying to kill the boy's father.

In response to public outrage the police commissioner showed up to offer condolence and money to the family. But ever loyal to his troops he claimed that no one knew who killed the boy, thereby giving credence to the police story of a shootout. It is not known if the boy's family accepted the money.

Most Jamaicans are now fully aware that the state has given the police de facto power to carry out extrajudicial killings. The silence and indifference to egregious acts of brutality is proof enough. Political parties avoid the people's cry for justice by conveniently keeping the matter out of the election campaign.

Thus when Adams dismisses the notion that one is innocent until proven guilty he is merely expressing the reality of what obtains in practice both at the level of the police administering swift punishment or the courts and lockups making innocence a very difficult proposition for a poor person to prove.

Similarly, the police accusation that human rights organizations are protecting criminals is a reflection of the consequences of police power to define who is a criminal. In the mind of the police all that is required to make a person a criminal is an accusation.

According to this twisted police logic to oppose police maltreatment of such accused persons is to be protecting "criminals." It is also a wedge being used to pressure and intimidate human rights groups into silence.

Adams, for example, is reportedly ready to arrest human rights groups that take pictures and "spy" on him while he is executing his duties. None other than the minister of justice has lent his support to this form of harassment by railing against "civic groups" who seek to displace the state.

It is now the prime minister's turn to use his campaign for a fourth term to call for unconditional support to the police. The vexed question of brutality and corruption

is never mentioned. So too is the silence in the campaign of the opposition Jamaica Labour Party.

As to how long the social fabric will withstand this myopic obsession with power and disregard for justice and human rights, only time will tell.

Dance with Disaster

by Roger Neill

In 1988, Hurricane Gilbert blew sheets of zinc off the roof of the “hospital” at General Penitentiary on Tower Street in Kingston, leaving the sky visible through the wooden lath. It has not been repaired since that day.

The windows lack glass and as the prison sits on the shore of Kingston Harbor (which sailors say is the windiest stretch of water on the island), lashing rain soaks it with every rainstorm. It is a “hospital” without nurses and has been condemned by the Department of Health of Jamaica for nearly a year and a half now. But who cares?

The psychiatric section is a prison within a prison. There are cells there that flood with every rainstorm. The mentally ill usually sleep on rags or cardboard on the cement floors, so one need only imagine the conditions in the rain.

Some mentally ill inmates are also held in the Invalid Range and the George Davis Centre along with other prisoners. Certain of these cells have bars rotted by rust and so to contain the inmate, the solid wood door is closed with a 19th-century lock and the only ventilation comes from a grilled arch over the door so the inmate stands on something in order to get the air and see some light in the tiny dungeon.

Improving Too Slowly

These are the “improved” conditions. Since a young full-time Jamaican psychiatrist was seconded from the Ministry of Health in 1996, none of the mentally ill are still rolling around naked in their own feces. There are now two full-time physicians, one full-time dentist, two psychiatrists (one sessional), and two psychologists to deal with a total Department of Correctional Services incarcerated population of approximately 4,000 persons. Still, there are constant shortages or absences of basic pharmaceuticals and med-

This statement was issued July 30, 2002, by Jamaicans United Against Police Brutality. The coordinator of JUAPB is Lloyd D’Aguilar, a freelance journalist and human rights activist living in Jamaica.

ical equipment and what is there is often in unhygienic conditions.

Five-month-trained paramedical warders do (or supervise) procedures that should only be attempted by a registered nurse. But there aren’t any nurses, only a matron who is mandated to train these paramedics. Thus, during a labor dispute in January 2000, warders and supervised inmate orderlies sutured significant lacerations, removed bullets that had not been removed by physicians, gave injections, and distributed medication. When the workload became overwhelming they taught trusted inmates to do these tasks so that inmates were giving injections, handing out medication, extracting teeth, and suturing wounds. Even after the labor dispute was settled, the practices allegedly continued.

Many inmates refuse to eat the prison food and many others get sick on it. The promises of a recently installed catering system of excellent, nutritional food, with good variety and presentation, have proven to be fiction.

Noxious Labor Relations

The labor relations climate in Jamaica’s prisons is noxious. In the year 2000 after a three-day sick-out protest, the Commissioner of Corrections sent 800 of the 1,600 warders on interdiction (furlough with one-quarter pay) and brought in the army. Soldiers are not meant to be policemen or correctional officers and very shortly afterward the already-depleted security and medical care systems broke down.

In June 2002, inmates tried to blow the wall with dynamite. They failed! The blast was so powerful that it hurled one brick segment clear across the institution and rocked the local houses. The dynamite was set against a specially reinforced segment of wall, otherwise there would have been a mass exodus.

What About Jamaica? (continued)

I might choose the tongue of bitterness.

“It takes cash to care”

“We put people first”

“One thousand murdered in 2001”

“Police kill one hundred and forty four”

“It caan wuk”

“Nuttin naah gwan”

“Huge drug find on South Coast”

“DEM FI DEAD!”

Impossible to choose

a single tongue

I must speak

in all

Like Creole-patois, choose and

enfold

Make mine

all I find

Like Creole-patois, make mine

only that I choose

I choose the tongue of hope.

The tongue of my land

Is a loud tongue, a proud tongue

A tongue mixed in age and beauty

memory and dream

The tongue of my land

I-land

Home

To memory and paradise

Bitterness and dream

Making each new tomorrow’s

tongue speak

Jamaica

—Carolyn Gomes, chair, Jamaicans For Justice

continued on page 8

From 1999 to 2001, someone was stabbed or seriously assaulted every few days and someone murdered every few weeks. It was and remains a dangerous place to be. Several inmates have been responsible for as many as ten murders each while in prison.

Since MCC assigned a volunteer psychiatric social worker to the medical team and chap-

laincy in January 1999, the MCCer has had four of his clients murdered (two of them specially trained peer counselors). One of those was killed virtually before the worker's eyes. More recently, he held in his hands the head of a man who had been stabbed 23 times. In the 1997 riots (a result of another labor dispute), 28 men were murdered by other inmates and many had their bodies set on fire.

But the arduous conditions do not apply to all inmates. Jamaica is a class-stratified, politically (i.e., "tribally") divided society and it is no different in the prisons. Some inmates have private cells with beds and mattresses, electricity, their own cooking appliances. They never eat prison food (a measure of status inside the institution) and have radios, televisions, cellular telephones (illegal), chain saws, and other power tools. They live a comfortable, privileged life. These are inmates who are politically or criminally "connected" or have independent sources of funds.

Often the mentally ill serve as the physical slaves and sex slaves within the institutions. They do the dirty work and are then driven off when they try to collect payment. They get few or no visits and have no personal care products. Their poor judgment often results in selling their body for a shag (left-over tobacco "cut" with small quantities of drugs or leaves, wrapped in any kind of paper).

They are ostracized from the rest of the prison population and are not invited to prison parties, social events, rehabilitation programs, or church. They are double-stigmatized as "madmen" and "homosexuals." Some have been gang-raped to the point of major physical damage and/or psychosis and some have died of AIDS when there was no indication of homosexual behavior or HIV prior to their incarceration. But these things are difficult to prove in an environment where access to medical testing and treatment is so woefully deficient.

Mental Patients as Victims

The running of a prison is in fact a delicate balance of informal cooperation between administration, staff, and organized crime. A prison is a "river of money" and rife with the most spectacular corruption. You have a captive drug market, with political and drug gangs competing for turf; you have underpaid warders and staff and a prison population who will pay a premium price

Scary Movie

I sit on the edge of the old man's bed in the "hospital" at District Prison. He smiles a toothless smile as he leans on one arm in filthy black pants and old shirt. At his feet is a malodorous puddle of his own urine. He does not know what day or month it is but knows he is in Spanish Town. He is confident of the year: it is 1918.

Around him is a sea of beds and windows that have no glass and no covering so that the rain gusts in when it storms.

His ankles are swollen and he has shortness of breath when stressed (perhaps indicating cardiac insufficiency). He laughs pleasantly as I ask him questions about his home. I can barely understand a word he has said to me but the other inmates give me assistance. I ask him when he was born and he proudly tells me: "Tuesday"! He can provide nothing more. Some say he is 60, others say 80. His clinical and penal records do not indicate a birthdate.

This dear old man was suffering from schizophrenia at (probable age) 47 and from what one can draw from the record, he committed either burglary or felonious wounding and that is the reason he is in prison. The charges were laid in September 1969. He was forgotten.

His real crime was the crime of mental illness!

A social work assessment indicates that his other family members are either dead or "foreign" except for one 94-year-old aunt who is of course unable to care for him. He owns a house in Clarendon but no one can tell me if it is habitable, derelict, or occupied. Except for its value as a potential asset, the information is almost academic since he could not care for himself in the house, nor are community medical supports available.

So now, 32 years later in what appears to be a full-blown senile dementia, he is sick, helpless, and alone and being sent to court to determine if he is fit to stand trial for a minor crime committed in 1969. Had MCC not brought his case (and many others) to the attention of the authorities, he would have simply died and been dropped into a pauper's grave—unannounced and unmourned as has already happened to so many others.

The last one who died was the "one foot man" who had no crutch and walked on his knees and "stood" on his knees while we sang Christmas carols in the first party ever for the mentally ill, December 2000.

He has no place to go! The state has kept him incarcerated for a generation because they forgot. Now they are reluctant to release him because he has no family to go to. They are afraid of the bad press.

The state mental hospital (Bellevue) will not take him because he has been in prison. He is not eligible for probation services or entitlements because he has never been charged. The infirmaries will not take him because he has been in prison. There are no community psychiatric facilities available to him because of his high-level care requirements. He cannot be convicted of his crime 32 years later because there are no remaining witnesses or evidence against him.

This Kafkaesque horror has been played out repeatedly in Jamaica's much-renowned, rehabilitation oriented correctional system. It is "one of the best," and Harvard University has just visited with some 20 journalists to confirm it is so.

Somehow the flooded cells for the mentally ill got overlooked. Somehow the "hospital" that has been condemned by the Ministry of Health got overlooked. Somehow the 350 mentally ill inmates living in subhuman conditions and running out of medication on a monthly basis . . . got overlooked.

Somehow, this little old man who has spent a lifetime in prison because he was ill . . . got overlooked.

—Roger Neill

for any small comfort that was available to them before incarceration. You have contracts for maintenance and renovation and improvements; huge contracts for food, sanitation, and medical supplies; an unhappy work force interacting with a criminal population in a country that is often alluded to as “the Nigeria of the Caribbean.”

In a country where there are three murders every day (on a population base of 2.5 million), there is no shortage of new recruits. The most vulnerable and accessible victim of this corrupt system is the mental patient.

But the victimization of the mentally ill does not apply only to the institution. As has been recently uncovered, one man (unfit to plead) spent 29 years in prison for breaking a window while psychotic. He simply got lost in the chamber of horrors. No one to advocate for him, no database, no law requiring that he be called back before the court for review. When MCC found him he was dirty, smelly, in rags and barefoot.

While in prison, he was sexually abused, lost the sight of one eye, and lost his family because of a mix-up in name. Inmates and orderlies (trusted inmates) and medical orderlies (paramedic warders) were all aware of him and the injustice done to him but no one could get him out. After an MCCer discovered him, it still took two years to get him out. He had become an embarrassment to the Ministry of National Security and the Ministry of Justice.

Is he the only one? No! He is one of many amongst hundreds of mentally ill who were only identified by an MCC-generated spreadsheet—almost accidentally. The record-keeping for these inmates was so abysmal that there were men without records and records without men. Many had died. It is a striking example of the most tragic neglect of human beings in a sophisticated, pseudo-democratic state that basically doesn't care about those who cannot “push.”

A Deafening Silence

When the media discovered that there were six mentally ill men who had been in prison 30 years or more, most for minor crimes, and dozens who had been in for at least a decade . . . there was public outrage, right? There were demonstrations, right? The head of the university department of psychiatry began to immediately investigate and remedy the situation, right? The parliamentary opposition jumped on the issue as did the electronic media and talk shows, and they kept up the pressure till all these men were

released because their constitutional rights had been violated, right?

WRONG! There was no concerted interest on the part of the media, no word from the loyal opposition, no word from the head of the department of psychiatry, no word from the executive branch of government, no outrage from the heads of the Ministry of Health or Community Psychiatry. A deafening silence fell on this island paradise after the traditional “nine-day wonder.”

It has taken the heroic efforts of a small but committed band of domestic and foreign NGOs, key Christians in the media, and one interested church to prevent this issue and its consequences from “going the way of all flesh.” For government, opposition, the Bar, the medical fraternity, the auditors, and the general population it is a non-issue. Even for a group of Harvard University law professors, it is unimportant in what they describe as the outstanding accomplishments in rehabilitation that the Jamaican Department of Correctional Services has been able to effect.

The mentally ill cannot speak for themselves. They are thus easy victims to ruthless individuals and the state. If they can be abused, neglected, and denied their constitutional rights because the bulk of the population do not see them as humans, then so can anyone else be abused, neglected, and denied their constitutional rights.

The situation has large consequence for peace and justice in general but more importantly for the moral fabric of the nation. It is indifference that allows for a Holocaust or gulag or killing fields or slavery. We forget that it is stated clearly in Isaiah 53 that it is inimical to God's will that a man should be subverted in his just cause. Though no one else cares, God in Christ Jesus cares and his church and all others will be held accountable.

Are there grounds for hope? Yes! Are there improvements? Yes, and MCC and heroic Jamaicans have partnered to make them happen.

It is thus a privilege that MCC should be able to actively advocate these men's cause “in the name of Christ.”

Roger Neill, an MCC volunteer from Chilli-wack, B.C., works in Kingston, Jamaica, as a psychiatric social worker with the Mentally Ill in Prison Project of the Independent Jamaica Council for Human Rights.

It is a striking example of the most tragic neglect of human beings in a sophisticated, pseudo-democratic state that basically doesn't care about those who cannot “push.”

If [the mentally ill] can be abused, neglected, and denied their constitutional rights because the bulk of the population do not see them as humans, then so can anyone else be abused, neglected, and denied their constitutional rights. The situation has large consequence for peace and justice in general but more importantly for the moral fabric of the nation.

Toward Accountability and Respect: Building a Culture of Peace in Jamaica

by Bruce Guenther

To date no one has been held responsible for the death of Michael Gayle, a 26-year-old mentally ill man from the community of Olympic Gardens in Kingston, Jamaica.

Gayle was beaten, kicked, and gun-butted for a period of approximately 15 minutes by Jamaican soldiers and police on August 21, 1999. He had attempted to cross a curfew barricade imposed by security forces in the community. This questioning of authority left Gayle with a ruptured stomach, which caused him to throw up his own feces before dying three days later.

An inquest was held, and the jury determined that all persons at the barricade that night were criminally responsible for the death of Michael Gayle. However, the crown body responsible for criminal prosecution refused to move forward with charges against these officials because they lacked sufficient evidence to prosecute.

While Gayle's case lay unrecognized by Jamaican officials, German tourists and international diplomats received countless apologies from the prime minister of

Jamaica after overzealous custom agents searched through an entire cruise ship's luggage on the pier while the group toured Jamaica's North Coast. At the prime minister's request, an immediate investigation ensued.

As for Michael Gayle's family—no one has been held responsible for their loss, no apology made, and they have received no public acknowledgment from any government officials.

Accountability

The Michael Gayle story is not atypical; it serves as a paradigm to depict the primary issue facing the human rights situation in Jamaica: accountability. Though the country's laws and constitution are well developed in that they state the need for rights to be protected, assaults by agents of the state on citizens' human rights consistently go unpunished. This abuse and its lack of acknowledgment primarily affect those living in Kingston's inner-city communities.

"There is a large gap between those who hold positions of power and those who feel they don't have any," says Susan Goffe, vice chair of the human rights group Jamaicans For Justice (JFJ), which grew out of the Gayle family's struggle. "When we were a colony, those governing Jamaica were not accountable to the Jamaican people. They were accountable to the Colonial Office in Britain. Since Independence our political leaders have also behaved as though they were not accountable to the Jamaican people."

The abuse of citizens' rights by those in positions of power, such as the security forces, occurs because it is allowed to occur. Fatal shootings by the Jamaican police force rank among the highest in the world per capita. Incidents of police killings reported to human rights organizations often follow the same pattern: police report a shootout with firearms seized, while community members relay a significantly different story.

When over 50 armed police raided a house in the area of Braeton, St. Catherine, in March 2001, community members recalled hearing the youth begging for their lives.

A little boy joined me halfway up to Hagley Gap and warned me about the *duppies* if I spent the night in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica. He explained that I better lash the tent door tight so the *duppie* not get me because if I "come out da tent him a chase me and kill mi." I asked him what the *duppie* looked like and he said it was "smady wid no head." He left me at Hagley Gap quite convinced I'm sure that "mi a go dead."

Next morning my pain-ravaged body unfolded from my tangled bedding to a high overcast, ferociously windy morning with flashes of sunlight. I was surrounded by flowers, had a leisurely breakfast that tasted better than eggs benedict, put on my pack again (screaming in pain), and started toward the peak.

Gorgeous day, coffee-scented breezes, friendly people, donkeys and farm workers and Christmas tree planters, honey gatherers, clean and neat little houses. A dread-lock Rastafarian advised me to take the footpath to Mavis Bank because he said it was much shorter.

You would never know that there were environmental problems in this idyllic scene unless you were well-read on the topic. Except for the obvious (but unspectacular) erosion you see on the lower, open, steep-slope coffee and banana plantations where the mountains have been stripped for the crops, things appear robust and green. But it is reported that Jamaica currently has the highest deforestation rate of any of the Caribbean islands. There is very little "old growth" remaining.

Punctual to the minute, Nelson was stunningly relieved when he saw me and told how he had fretted for two nights about whether some animal would eat me or some bad man would kill me on the trail but he said (as I had asked him) he just prayed and left it with the Lord. He told everyone about this mad customer he had who walked off alone into the Blue Mountains but said that he knew I was all right because when he slept "mi na see yu face." That meant God had taken care of me.

The Lord Jesus had indeed taken care of me and left me with a memory that will last a lifetime.

—Roger Neill (excerpted from a larger piece)

Seven young men were killed in what the police reported as a shootout. The bodies were found riddled with bullets, including a total of 17 to their heads. Despite neighbors' reports, authorities painted the youth as criminals in what is assumed an effort to justify the killing.

"We are living in a police state," says Dennis Daly, long-time human rights attorney with the Independent Jamaica Council for Human Rights (IJCHR) and lawyer at the inquest into the Braeton killings. "The police are allowed to dictate the terms. They act above the law and are allowed to act above the law so the culture of impunity just continues." The IJCHR traces its roots back to 1968, a few years after Jamaica's independence

The IJCHR has recently been working to make the state acknowledge its neglect of the mentally ill. Mentally ill inmates tend to be remanded in custody for lengthy periods of time because they are unfit to plead. In one such case, Ivan Boroughs, 76, remained remanded in custody for 29 years after being charged for breaking a window. The IJCHR states that mental illness leaves more than 400 inmates in Jamaican correctional institutions unfit to plead. Often left languishing for years without adequate medical attention, these inmates frequently fall victim to sexual abuse by other inmates.

Human Rights on the Back Burner

Despite much public attention, issues of human rights in Jamaica remain unpopular among the public. Unfortunately this also holds true for the Jamaican church—including the Jamaica Mennonite Church. Because of the Jamaican church's emphasis on gaining numbers (an ironic goal considering that an overwhelming majority of the population claims to be Christian), and its Pentecostal influence, it remains almost silent and inactive in relation to human rights issues. In a recent church service MCCers attended, prayers were made for Jamaica's security forces; unfortunately this plea came in the same breath as "and let good conquer over evil."

A "pro-criminal" stereotype explains, in part, why human rights groups and persons who call for a controlled use of force are so unpopular. The public wants to get tough on crime and politicians are willing to wave that banner in order to win political points. Political leaders exemplify this bent in recent assertions of needing to get rid of the narcotic "terrorists" and the "Taliban among us." Such rhetoric only feeds the public's

desire for extreme measures. Susan Goffe sums it up saying, "The problem is that we have always been prepared to use violence as a means to an end."

This mentality is further demonstrated through the overwhelming support the majority of Jamaicans express for the death penalty. Though capital crimes still exist in Jamaica, the justice system fails to process appeals quickly enough to comply with the ruling of the London Privy Council (Jamaica's highest court of appeal) that holding a person on death row for more than 5 years is cruel and inhumane treatment.

Many Jamaicans believe the government could solve the crime epidemic if it were to reinstate hanging. Similarly, many Jamaicans choose not to speak out against the arbitrary killings by the police, as they are made to believe this is an effective way to solve crime. However, the mistrust this abuse builds between inner-city communities and the police is extremely damaging; community members fear giving information to what they see as a corrupt and abusive force.

Signs of Progress

Jamaican nongovernmental organizations such as the IJCHR and Jamaicans For Justice are trying to change their country with the help of organizations like MCC. Recently IJCHR hired an attorney to deal specifically with issues relating to the mentally ill. Also, as a result of their IJCHR's lobbying, mentally ill inmates dubbed unfit to plead will now be brought before the court regularly in order to prevent them from being lost in the system. Things are changing.

Recent initiatives by the police to implement community policing models serve as another sign of progress. When crime or violent incidents flare up in communities, police officers come in to participate in larger community meetings. In these meetings, the community voices its opinion and takes ownership for the crime in the area.

This new approach to policing in Jamaica focuses on building relationships between community members and law enforcers in order to work toward a safer and more peaceful community. It has not taken long for this method of policing to prove its value over the traditional abusiveness and general lack of respect between police and the community.

New Resources

Mennonite Central Committee has released a new book entitled *Parent Trek: Nurturing Creativity and Care in Our Children*. The book draws on the parenting experiences of volunteers associated with MCC. Each chapter includes a meditation, a brief essay and reflection questions, and a set of practical ideas to try.

A preview of the book and ordering information can be found at <http://www.mcc.org/respub/trek/index.html>. Or you can order it by calling Provident Bookstore at 1-800-759-4447.

Another new MCC publication is *Harvest in the Balance: Food, Justice, and Biotechnology*. This 147-page volume looks at biotechnology and genetic engineering through a variety of lenses and raises questions about the effect on farmers and food-insecure people around the world. To order or for more information, contact Esther O'Hara at <geo@mcc.org> or at the return mailing address on the back page.

This new approach to policing in Jamaica focuses on building relationships between community members and law enforcers in order to work toward a safer and more peaceful community.

continued on page 12



**Mennonite
Central
Committee**

NONPROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
AKRON, PA
PERMIT NO. 3

21 South 12th Street
PO Box 500
Akron, PA 17501-0500

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

The *Peace Office Newsletter* is published quarterly by the Mennonite Central Committee Overseas Peace Office. Editor is Mark Siemens. Consulting Editors are Bob Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee.

Additional subscriptions welcome—see address below. To keep paper and energy waste at a minimum we ask you to inform us if an address should be changed or if a name should be dropped from our mailing list. Telephone: (717) 859-1151. Printed in the U.S.A.

To subscribe to the *Peace Office Newsletter*, please send your address to MCC, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500 or e-mail Bev Martin at <bjm@mcc.org>. Direct requests for additional copies of the newsletter to Esther O'Hara at <geo@mcc.org>. A donation of \$10.00 per year per subscription is suggested. Peace Office welcomes contributions to its work.

In addition, the IJCHR will launch a human rights education program that it seeks to implement in schools across the country. JFJ also recently launched three human rights videos explaining to persons their rights and what to do when those rights are violated. The police high command has even asked JFJ if these videos can be used in their training school.

Even the media recently picked up on issues related to human rights. Carolyn Gomes, JFJ chair, observes that “human rights issues are more discussed on the radio than they were three years ago.” Human rights activists such as Gomes are regular guests on many popular radio talk shows. “I really do think that things are changing. Our presence is having an effect. It’s just that when you are living through the changes it doesn’t necessarily feel that way.”

It is a pleasure for MCC Jamaica to partner with organizations that are willing to take a stand and stick their necks out. It is through their challenging of the unjust systems that change will happen in Jamaica so all persons will one day receive as much respect as those who visit the island via cruise ships. By holding the government responsible for its actions and neglect, Jamaicans will feel valued enough to put their trust in the authorities. It is only through this type of accountability and an equal respect for all lives that Jamaica will achieve a long, lasting peace.

In the meantime ordinary Jamaicans will continue to do extraordinary things in order to take the small steps required to work for change. And to them: “‘Nuff respect!”

Bruce Guenther, a student at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba, recently completed a one-year service assignment with Jamaicans For Justice through MCC's Service and Learning Together (SALT) program.