

Britain: Behind the row over Jamaican "drug mules"

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11 January 2002

A row erupted in December over so-called Jamaican "drug mules". It flared after British customs officers and police mounted a joint operation against airline passengers arriving in London from the Caribbean island. On December 12, 16 Jamaicans were arrested on suspicion of having swallowed cocaine packages, and five days later, 22 Jamaicans were charged with attempting to smuggle a "Class A" drug, after disembarking from an Air Jamaica flight.

Following the arrests, Phil Sinkinson, the British Deputy High Commissioner in Jamaica, said that a newspaper report alleging one in 10 passengers from Jamaica were smuggling drugs could be an underestimate. Dozens on each flight from the Jamaican capital Kingston could be involved, he suggested.

But leading black representatives in the UK denounced Sinkinson for stirring up racial tension. Trevor Phillips, deputy leader of the Greater London Council, argued that Sinkinson was indulging in scare mongering, which could mean Jamaican's becoming "increasingly reluctant to help the police detect those few who are coming in with drugs". Phillips complained, "Perfectly innocent" Jamaicans "will find that this is going to be used to harry them, to hinder them, to hold them up at airports".

In response, Jamaican narcotics police supported Sinkinson's statement, saying "umpteen drugs couriers are travelling from Jamaica to the UK". Some reports placed the figure as being over 50 percent of passengers travelling to Britain.

Jamaica does not produce cocaine, but is a major conduit for its distribution worldwide. Much of the narcotic imported into Jamaica is destined for the European market, especially Britain where a kilogram of cocaine can sell for many times its wholesale value. On top of this, the tightening of security procedures in the US following September 11 has diverted more drugs traffic to Britain and Europe. The *Observer* newspaper reports that prior to the attacks on New York and Washington, 50 percent of all drugs intercepted from airline traffic in the US came from Jamaica.

Behind the present controversy, and the now repeated

demands for increased security and police measures, the more pressing issues raised by the "drug mules" scare has gone largely unreported.

What has led to so many ordinary Jamaicans becoming embroiled in the drugs trade? The simple answer is that although the sun-seeking tourists who visit may see the lush Caribbean island as a tropical paradise, Jamaica is an economic and social nightmare for many of its inhabitants.

According to the CIA *World Factbook*, almost one-third of the island's 2.5 million population live below the poverty line. This figure, which is only an estimate, is actually 10 years out of date. Given that the last decade has seen a precipitous economic decline on the island, with unemployment growing to almost 20 percent, the actual figure is much higher.

For decades the island's main sources of income have been bauxite (mined for aluminium) and tourism. During the 1990s, in scenes replayed around the world, the Jamaican government began dismantling national economic controls in a bid to attract greater foreign investment. In 1992, the incoming People's National Party (PNP) government of Prime Minister Percival James Patterson eliminated price controls and began privatising state industries.

The change was especially devastating for this small island, resulting in many factories being closed, whilst falling commodity prices hit the bauxite industry, which accounts for 53 percent of Jamaica's exports. In addition, the development of the North Atlantic Free Trade Area, involving the US, Canada and Mexico, saw the island increasingly sidelined.

With a burgeoning foreign debt of \$3.2 billion—\$1,216 for every person living in Jamaica—the government stepped up its bid to increase tourism (which has become the island's main provider of foreign exchange), particularly from the US, which accounts for 71 percent of all visitors. Even before September 11, however, Jamaica was losing out to other Caribbean islands.

Poverty and political corruption have fuelled an explosion in crime and crime-related violence. Jamaica has one of the

highest homicide rates in the world, with more than 1,100 people murdered in 2001, an increase of 28 percent on the previous year and the highest annual number ever recorded.

Many of the island's rival gangs are affiliated to either the PNP or the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) led by Edward Seaga. Inter-gang violence is especially intense during election periods. In 1980, for example, approximately 700 people were killed in election-related violence. The gangs also control the island's lucrative drug trade.

Jamaica's army and police have been given a free hand to enforce law and order in the ghettos. In July last year, for example, troops backed by helicopter gunships and tanks strafed a poor neighbourhood that has suffered repeated gang violence. At least 27 people were killed in this operation, including several children. According to Human rights group Amnesty International, Jamaica has the highest per capita number of police killings per year.

In response to business complaints, police were also directed to round up the homeless and mentally ill men and women found on the streets in the popular tourist destination of Montego Bay. They were said to be spoiling the resort's image. Last September, the government was forced to agree to compensate a group of 32 people who had been victims of such a dragnet. They had been tied up and bussed almost 100 kilometres away, where they were left near a toxic waste site.

The glaring contrast between the luxurious tourist facilities and the ghettos that are home to many Jamaicans has fuelled social antagonisms.

Average annual per capita income is just US\$2,430, with schools and hospital services beyond the reach of many. Such is the dilapidated state of much of Jamaica's non-tourist infrastructure that many inhabitants are without reliable supplies of drinking water.

It was against this background that increased fuel duties and a new round of austerity measures saw a significant growth in civil unrest and riots in many neighbourhoods last year, which were brutally put down by the police and army.

In his remarks, High Commissioner Sinkinson was forced to acknowledge a link between the growing trade in cocaine trafficking and the island's economic decline. Most of the smugglers "come from areas of pretty desperate poverty", he said. "The risks are quite high, but in real terms the rewards for the couriers are equally high."

Jamaican "drug mules" are reportedly paid between US\$2,880 and US\$7,200 for each trip. Most of the smugglers are women, and many are single parents struggling to raise three or four children and finance them through school. Others are coerced by threats of violence to act as couriers.

Some women conceal up to 100 "wraps" of cocaine about

their person, or swallow and/or insert the packages into other body orifices, placing themselves at great risk. In October, a 30-year-old woman died on a flight from Kingston to Heathrow when one of the 55 packages she had in her stomach burst.

Tighter security measures and tougher sentences mean that 34 percent of all women prisoners in England and Wales are now Jamaicans who have been convicted of drug smuggling, according to a report in the *Times* newspaper. The minimum sentence handed out to these unfortunate women is six years, with some receiving up to 10 years imprisonment, leaving many of their children separated from their mothers with no adequate care. After serving their time they are deported back to Jamaica.

None of these repressive measures have done anything to quell the drugs trade, because nothing has been done to ameliorate the desperate poverty which the criminal gangs can exploit to their own ends.

On January 3, the World Bank announced a meagre US\$75 million "Emergency Economic Rehabilitation Loan" to Jamaica (less than \$30 for each inhabitant). According to Orsalia Kalantzopoulos, director of the World Bank's programme in the Caribbean, "Within the short span of six months, Jamaica has had to confront violence in Kingston, significant damage to agriculture and infrastructure due to flooding associated with Hurricane Michelle and, above all, a drastic loss of revenue in Jamaica's tourism industry following the tragic attacks of September 11". But the loan is dependent upon stepping up precisely the type of free market, austerity measures that are impoverishing so many of the island's inhabitants.



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