

Murder under the Caribbean sky

The recent murders of Dr Catherine Mullany and her husband Benjamin whilst on honeymoon in Antigua has thrown a spotlight on crime levels in the Caribbean. Peter Riley reports on how nearby Jamaica aims to tackle its murder rate, one of the highest in the world.

The sun might shine on most days of the year, the temperature may be fabulous compared to that in the UK and life may appear idyllic as Jamaica plays out a role to the rest of the world as a paradise, but underneath the sensuous side of such paradise is a very nasty side indeed.

For Jamaica, with a mere 2,600,000 people, now has one of the world's highest crime rates with murder taking centre stage between January and July 2008, 826 people were murdered.

In June alone murders climbed by a chilling 95 percent over the same period in 2007 with a truly scary rise of 41 percent overall in major crimes in the past year.

As if this shadow over paradise were not enough, the statistics make Jamaica the second most dangerous country in the world after Colombia and tourists were recently warned in the travel press not to hire cars and drive alone in Jamaica after three tourists were murdered in the Kingston area in one weekend alone. In 2007 there were 1574 murders on the island, an increase of 18 percent of the previous year.

It is a scenario that concerns Jamaica's politicians not least its new Prime Minister Bruce Golding who addressed the country's Parliament recently and

made promises that his government would take urgent steps to address the crime problem.

He commented: "The Government is taking steps to support the efforts of the Police in a number of critical, strategic areas. These include additional resources to increase mobility and technical support for operational activity. A number of legislative changes will be brought to Parliament to strengthen the capacity of the Police to apprehend those engaged in violent criminal activity, especially those involving gun crimes, and to keep them off the streets.

"Arrangements are being made to expedite the trial of cases involving gun crimes to ensure that those who are guilty are not allowed free rein to continue their mayhem while the judicial process grinds slowly."

He said the reorganisation of the Jamaica Constabulary Force to transform it into an efficient peace-keeping, law enforcement and crime fighting machine "is of paramount importance" though he admitted that the Government is also seeking to address some of the difficult conditions under which the JCF has to work, including dilapidated police offices.

But with the best will in the world the transformation of the police into

something resembling one that will gain worldwide respect as well as respect from Jamaicans themselves is not going to be easy. With crime figures at such a high premium, showing, for example, that besides the murders already mentioned, there were 747 shooting cases, 386 rapes, 211 cases of carnal abuse, 107 larceny cases, 967 break-ins and 1,183 cases of robbery in the first seven months of 2008, figures which have hardly inspired confidence amongst the general population of the Jamaica press.

In July 119 new recruits were enrolled as police officers with the Jamaica Constabulary Force and addressing them on graduation day, Senator Arthur Williams, Minister of National Security addressed the issue firmly when he said: "These 119 persons (88 males and 31 females) are graduating at a critical juncture in our history. I say it is a critical juncture for two reasons. Firstly, because of the alarming state of crime and violence in our country and secondly because we are on the cusp of a new era of policing in Jamaica.

"It is not going to be easy, because there are some criminals out there who are waging war against both citizens and the security forces, with the aim of terrorising and intimidating the entire



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Murder most foul: Jamaica has one of the highest rates in the world

society. These terrorist gunmen would like to believe that the gun gives power not to obey the laws of the land, but gives them the freedom to rob, to rape, to shoot and murder at will.”

It is such a constant concern to the Jamaican Government and the Jamaica Constabulary Force hierarchy that the newly appointed Police Commissioner Rear Admiral Hardley Lewin recently offered his resignation to the Prime Minister but reversed his decision

following a discussion between the two men.

Nevertheless the task before Commissioner Lewin to reverse the trend of shootings, gang killings and the murder of children (of which there were 70 in 2007, or the equivalent of two classrooms) is going to be a difficult one in a nation that appears to have become inured to violence. Of course in the media he comes across as a man full of confidence, as one might expect, but his

Changing times: Jamaica is determined to tackle violent crime

offer to resign sent shock waves through the Caribbean island.

But whatever the Commissioner believes he can achieve through more manpower or resources, the country as a whole has a deep rooted belief that violence in Jamaica is so well entrenched that it will take more than mere words to achieve the impossible, with a loss of civil rights having already been mooted as one way of solving the problem. The murder of children, if it continues at its

present high level, could well result in a temporary loss of civil rights

Jamaican children's rights activist Betty-Ann Blaine said: "In any society where you have a murder rate that's so high, you're going to have a high rate among children. In other words, there is a direct correlation between the high level of murders among adults and the level of children who are murdered.

"These days children are killed not by drive by shootings, not by stray bullets, but they (criminals) go into a home, they see a child and kill him. It's an alarming new trend."

The numbers of murders of children in Jamaica has not escaped the attention of the United Nations and UNICEF has termed it "unacceptable" and has called on the Jamaican Government to increase its efforts to stamp down on the armed violence currently blighting the island paradise which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors a year and earns the country almost one and a half billion dollars annually, making it without doubt its most important industry.

According to the Daily Gleaner, the island's most famous and popular newspaper, the Prime Minister has been considering introducing to Parliament plans to extend the period of detention, without charge, of those suspected of murder and gun related charges, though, as in the UK recently, this has courted controversy. But Mr Golding's plans don't end there, says the Gleaner, for he has also proposed restriction of bail in relation to specified charges; minimum sentences, majority guilty verdicts for non-capital offences (they still have the death penalty in Jamaica) and, again following a recent British suggestion, the removal of rights to silence in certain cases.

Nothing is certain yet as the plans are being discussed by a joint Government- Opposition think-tank, but there is no doubt at all in the mind of all law-abiding Jamaicans that there is a need to do something to stem the level of violence that has continually grown in the 40 odd years since independence.

But human rights remains a potent issue for political parties to deal with, in



Bruce Golding is the Prime Minister of Jamaica

other words trying to find the balance between what the people will accept and what the Government deems desirable in curtailing the upward spiral of serious crimes, particularly murders and rapes.

To show that this is as important in Jamaica as it is in Britain is shown clearly by a statement from Prime Minister Bruce Golding's office in which he said he reiterated his commitment to the protection of human rights in his government's latest response to fighting crime.

"I am amazed that none of our political leaders, political analysts or social scientists sees the need to raise the social standing of the average policeman and woman in society as the first step in dealing with the problem."

Mr Golding said: "The safety of citizens and the issue of defending their rights and freedoms were not independent of each other, but that both concerns were critical parts of the equation of fighting crime. A careful balance is needed between the two in the effective response to crime in the country."

He added: "There are communities where there are others who are in

control (the gangs and gangsters), and the security forces will have to take back control and demonstrate that they have that control. From a tactical point of view, what you need to do is take back control of that community to restore some order."

Influential Daily Gleaner columnist Claude Robinson told his readers: "Prime Minister Bruce Golding is right about the urgency and absolute necessity of the state regaining control over every nook and cranny in Jamaica. No self respecting state could tolerate such a situation, and the Government would be in clear dereliction of its duty to provide a safe and secure environment for citizens to go about their lawful business if it did nothing."

But one Gleaner correspondent, Albert Elliott, currently living in Canada, added an interesting footnote to the policing problem in Jamaica, (and one that would be well worthwhile for British politicians to think seriously about), when, writing about police pay in Jamaica, where the average beat officer in Jamaica currently earns only around £3,000 - £5,000 a year depending on length of service, wrote: "I am amazed that none of our political leaders, political analysts or social scientists sees the need to raise the social standing of the average policeman and woman in society as the first step in dealing with the problem.

"How can we expect policemen and women in Jamaica to be respected when they are paid a fifth or even less of what is paid to the average middle-level manager in Jamaica? A well paid, highly motivated and respected police force must be the financial priority of any government."

It will be interesting to see whether "the cusp of a new era of policing in Jamaica" promised by Senator Arthur Williams, Minister of National Security, bodes well for future stability and a massive crime reduction that Jamaica needs if it is to stop the headlines talking about murder under the Caribbean sky.