

Jamaica's business is the Caribbean's business

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By Sir Ronald Sanders

The widely publicised bloody clashes over the last few days between law enforcement agencies and armed gangs in Jamaica are as bad for the economic and social well-being of the people of Caribbean countries as they are for Jamaicans.

While the members of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) see themselves as a “Community of Independent Sovereign States”, most of the rest of the world regard them as one area.

Only the most knowledgeable make a distinction between them. So, events in Jamaica impact all other CARICOM countries whether they like it or not.

In meaningful terms, therefore, Jamaica's business is CARICOM's business. Neither CARICOM governments nor the people of CARICOM can sit back and pretend that events in Jamaica in which criminals defy the authority of the State are not relevant to them. CARICOM countries are tied together and none can deny cross-border relationships in trade, investment and people. Jamaica is the biggest of the CARICOM countries in population terms and it impresses and influences the world far more than other CARICOM countries. Of course, the impression and influence have been both beneficial and inimical to Jamaica and the wider region.

On the positive side, the vibrant music of Jamaica and its musicians, led by the iconic Bob Marley, have clearly given Jamaica global recognition. So too have its holiday resorts which are playgrounds for tourists from all over Europe and North America. Jamaican agricultural products, such as its Blue Mountain Coffee, and many of its manufactured goods have been able to penetrate foreign markets more deeply than those from other regional countries.

And, CARICOM's negotiations with large countries and groups of countries would be much weaker and far less effective without the participation of Jamaica. Its relatively large population of close to three million people makes Jamaica a more attractive market than the majority of CARICOM countries which, with the exception of Trinidad and Tobago, each number less than a million people.

Because of the size of its population, even with the limitations of educational opportunities, Jamaica also has more qualified technical people for bargaining internationally than its partner countries in CARICOM. Therefore, the participation of Jamaican negotiators in CARICOM teams is extremely valuable.

Jamaicans also constitute the largest number of the West Indian Diaspora in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

To the extent that the West Indian Diaspora is a group whose votes are wooed by political parties in these countries, much is owed to Jamaicans for the attention paid to Caribbean concerns. On the negative side, Jamaica's internal crime, and organised crime that its gangs have exported to Britain, Canada and the United States have created an unwholesome image for the country and severely damaged it economically. In the process, CARICOM has been weakened economically as well, for an economically weak Jamaica is unable to serve as a dynamo for economic activity and growth throughout the area.

Jamaica's high crime level has been bad for business and bad for its economy. A 2003 study found that the total costs of crime came to J\$12.4 billion which was 3.7% of GDP, and a 2007 UN report projected that if Jamaica could reduce violent crime to Costa Rica's low level, the economy would grow by 5.4%. In a World Bank survey, 39% of Jamaica's business managers said they were less likely to expand their businesses because of crime, and 37% reported that crime discourages investment that would have encouraged greater productivity.

Apart from scaring away investment, high crime in Jamaica has also caused many of its professionals and middle-class families to flee the country seeking safer environments abroad. More than 80 per cent of Jamaica's tertiary educated people have migrated to the world's industrialised nations.

It doesn't take much imagination to work out how much more socially and economically developed Jamaica would have been today had it not been plagued by over 30 years of escalating crime and its debilitating consequences.

From time to time, outbursts of violent crime have affected the country's tourism which contributes about 10 per cent of the country's GDP.

It is only because of expensive and extensive advertising and public relations campaigns in the main tourist markets that Jamaica has managed to keep its tourism arrivals by air fairly stable. This latest, globally-publicized, bloody confrontation between security forces and criminal gangs protecting a Drugs Don, Christopher "Dudus" Coke, from being served with an order for extradition to the United States and arrested, will damage the tourism industry harshly, and, again, once it is over, Jamaica will be forced to spend large sums repairing its image and assuring tourists of its safety.

Other CARICOM countries will not be immune from the Jamaica disturbances. On the basis that tourists see the Caribbean as one place, other Caribbean destinations will also have to spend more on promoting themselves.

The fact that "Dudus" could be protected by well-armed, criminal gangs who have neither respect for, nor fear of, Jamaica's security forces or the authority of the State, is a direct consequence of governance gone badly wrong. From the mid-1970s the two main political parties in Jamaica, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the Peoples National Party (PNP) have formed alliances with gangs that have been well-armed and in many cases are involved in the drugs trade. Having taken that step that renders politicians beholden to criminals, the political hierarchy began an inexorable downward spiral to disaster.

In effect, part of the State has been captured by leaders of criminal gangs to whom political parties are obligated. Nothing else but this sense of obligation to “Dudus” Coke can explain why Jamaica’s Prime Minister Bruce Golding, as Leader of the JLP, would have intervened at party level to influence a law enforcement matter between his government and the government of the US.

The Jamaican government now has to assert the authority of the State over “Dudus” and his gang, and it must be done if Jamaica is to be freed from the captivity of criminal gangs. And, when this particular confrontation is over, Jamaica must start the gruelling process of openly and transparently dismantling all party political connections with gangs, reasserting the supremacy of the State, and weeding out gangs that are the scourge of the society. Any alternative scenario is too terrifying to contemplate but it does include Jamaica being plunged into the status of a failed State.

This is why it behoves the current party political leaders to set to the task of recovering the State from the influence of criminals and establishing broad based institutions empowered by law to oversee public services and political practices. Jamaica will be economically stronger, socially better and politically more stable than it has been for decades and, as a consequence, CARICOM will benefit.

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