

Jamaica State of Siege: Scores Dead, Hundreds Detained

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Scores have been reported killed or wounded and hundreds arrested in what critics describe as indiscriminate violence by Jamaican security forces besieging an impoverished West Kingston neighborhood.

The confrontation, triggered by the Jamaican government's reluctant acquiescence to Washington's demand for the extradition of powerful and politically connected reputed drug trafficker, Christopher "Dudus" Coke, has continued for five days. Residents of Tivoli Gardens, Jamaica's first public housing development and a supposed stronghold of Coke and his supporters, have been turned into prisoners in their own homes as some 2,000 police and soldiers armed with automatic weapons and wearing combat helmets have stormed into the area.

In a call to Jamaica's News Talk Radio 93FM Wednesday night, two women from the Tivoli Gardens neighborhood said that they were trapped on the floor of their home, without food, electricity or water and terrified of being shot if they raised their heads.

"We're not animals down here," one of the women said. "We are humans."

Residents have reported the security forces firing rocket-propelled grenades and using bulldozers to demolish homes, while the media has raised questions about unexplained explosions in the housing estate.

The security forces have sought to keep a tight lid on the operation, turning away the media at gunpoint. On Wednesday, Jamaica's independent public defender, Earl Witter, a government official, was allowed into the zone and reported a count of 44 civilians dead.

Hospitals, however, had by Wednesday reported receiving the bodies of 60 civilians, and there were disturbing reports that suggest the real death toll could be significantly higher. Some residents of Tivoli Gardens have reported seeing troops burning corpses on piles of tires. And Kingston's Mayor Desmond McKenzie announced that he was launching an investigation following a Television Jamaica report Wednesday night showing police carrying coffins to a local cemetery for unauthorized burials.

McKenzie said he had demanded explanations from the chiefs of the army and the police. "I'm hoping that I will be given an answer, and the country will be given an answer that the people of West Kingston who have died under tragic circumstances are not being thrown into the ground just like that," the mayor said.

Jamaica's daily Gleaner reported Thursday that the carnage had "put morgues on the brink

of overflowing.” Agence-France Presse reported Wednesday that the morgue at one of the major Kingston hospitals had received three truckloads of bodies, including that of a baby.

Meanwhile, the Health Ministry has announced that public hospitals in the capital and surrounding area have suspended all but emergency services until further notice because of the growing number of casualties resulting from the police-army operation.

The countdown to the confrontation began May 17 when Jamaican Prime Minister Bruce Golding announced that, having dropped his nine-month-long opposition to the extradition of Coke, he would order his arrest.

The announcement triggered a series of non-violent demonstrations, including a march by a few hundred women on Parliament in defense of Coke, and then the erection of barricades in the streets of Kingston.

Finally, on Sunday, as the siege began, gunmen attacked several Jamaican police stations, burning one to the ground, killing two cops and wounding several others.

The accused drug lord has a significant base of support in the poor inner-city neighborhoods, where he has used his wealth and political connections to secure government contracts and jobs, while dispensing limited forms of social assistance not otherwise available.

Those political connections are at the center of Jamaica’s present crisis. Prime Minister Golding is the representative in parliament for the same Tivoli Gardens district, a seat he inherited from the previous long-time leader of the ruling Jamaica Labour Party, Edward Seaga.

It was Seaga who cemented the hold of the JLP and the drug gangsters over Tivoli Gardens. In 1980, he relied on these elements as shock troops in violent elections that claimed some 800 lives and brought his party to power through the defeat of the People’s National Party of Michael Manley. The PNP has controlled other neighborhoods with its own gang supporters.

Seaga tailored Jamaican policy to the demands of Washington, jettisoning the left-nationalist rhetoric of Manley. He became a key supporter of the Reagan administration’s Caribbean Basin Initiative, broke off relations with Cuba and supported the 1983 US invasion of Grenada.

The connections between Golding and Coke surfaced earlier this month, as questions arose about government payments to a high-powered US lobbying firm headed by Charles Mannatt, the former chairman of the Democratic Party and reported confidante of President Barack Obama.

Mannatt was apparently hired to lobby against the extradition order against Coke, meeting with administration officials to argue that the accused drug lord was in fact a legitimate businessman and philanthropist.

While first claiming that a local JLP-connected lawyer pretending to represent the government had paid for Mannatt’s services, Golding later acknowledged that he had authorized payment of the lobbying bills by the JLP.

In what appears to be a ratcheting up of US pressure on Golding, ABC News reported Wednesday that the prime minister had been named in US court documents as a “known criminal affiliate” of Coke. According to the ABC report, US officials cited wiretapped telephone conversations between the Jamaican leader and the accused drug trafficker.

Meanwhile, the London daily Independent reported that Coke’s gang, the so-called Shower Posse—so named for the quantity of bullets it unleashes in confrontations with its rivals—was in the direct employ of the JLP and used to turn out the vote in the district during elections.

Golding issued a statement denouncing both media reports as “extremely offensive” and part of a “conspiracy to undermine the duly elected Government of Jamaica.” ABC responded that it is sticking by its story.

Despite the growing evidence of criminality in the government, the opposition People’s National Party has withdrawn its previous demand for a no-confidence vote and rallied to the support of the JLP government’s military crackdown. The party’s leader in parliament declared that “now is not the time” for such a debate, and that “all of us must take this opportunity to rid the society of a cancer that has befallen us over time.”

Human rights advocates in Jamaica condemned the unfolding state violence, while pointing out that lawless acts of repression by the security forces are more the rule than the exception. According to Amnesty International, police in Jamaica killed 253 people in 2009, and took a similar number of lives in previous years.

“I have grave concerns about the loss of life,” Yvonne McCalla-Sobers, convener of Families Against State Terrorism (FAST), a Jamaican human rights group, told the WSWS. “If you take the round figure of 50 people killed, almost all of them in Tivoli and Denham Town, and the fact that the police report only four guns recovered, all of them outside of those areas, it is quite a disparity. It is hard to believe that 50 people all fired at the police, and then their guns disappeared. Such a disparity suggests that people were killed indiscriminately.”

She added that serious questions were also raised by the roundup of over 500 people by the police. “It suggests that the police who went into Tivoli Gardens didn’t know who they were looking for. It’s like net fishing, instead of spear fishing. You just throw out your net and hope you find some sizeable fish among all of the minnows.”

As a result, she said, people were deprived of their jobs, and a number of student youth caught up in the dragnet were prevented from taking their examinations. Those arrested, she added, were prevented from seeing attorneys for days.

She added that the actions of the security forces appeared to be a matter of “collective punishment” against the entire population of the Kingston district for acts carried out by unknown individuals who assaulted police stations last Sunday. “Clearly, we don’t see any signs that the people who did these things have been caught,” she said.

“These police killings have been going on for quite a while,” Lloyd D’Aguilar, a radio journalist and campaigner against police abuses, told the WSWS. “We have had one of the highest rates of homicide in the world, one of the highest rates of extra-judicial killings and one of the most corrupt governments in the world.”

D’Aguilar linked the eruption of violence in Kingston to mounting social tensions produced

by the impact of the world financial crisis on the island's economy and an official unemployment rate that has climbed to 14.5 percent, with many more jobless workers not even counted.

"We have lost a lot of jobs in the past year, about 70,000 on top of the 700,000 that we already had out of work," he said. "The crisis has seen the bauxite-aluminum industry collapse, with plants shut down and workers laid off. The sugar industry has also gone into slump, which accounts for a lot of jobs. And much of the private sector has used the crisis as an opportunity to reposition, laying off people to boost their profits."

The government has imposed the full impact of the crisis upon the working class. Jamaica is one of the most highly indebted countries in the world, with a debt to GDP ratio of 120 percent. The IMF recently reached a US\$1.27 billion Stand-By Arrangement with Jamaica, conditioned on deficit-cutting measures that include several billion dollars in cuts from basic services such as the National Health Fund and a new round of regressive taxes.

The response of the Jamaican ruling elite to the deepening social and economic crisis, said D'Aguilar, "has always been to deal with it in a paramilitary way. They don't invest in the inner-city neighborhoods and they don't create jobs for young people."

He added that the Jamaican financial elite had grown wealthy off of the deepening misery of the population. "The IMF deal is meant to shore up the banks and ensure the payment of the country's debt," he said. "According to official figures, 60 percent of that debt is in local hands, while 40 percent is held by foreign entities. But even a portion of the foreign holdings is actually owned by people in Jamaica. So what you have here now is a rapacious finance capitalist class that exercises a total lock on the economy."

The Jamaican government has used the present crisis to push for the speedy implementation of a sweeping series of crime bills that will largely institutionalize the kind of repressive actions now being unleashed by the security forces.

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