JAMAICA: HOMICIDES AND THE PEACE MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE

This paper is about Jamaica, 2.6 million people on a small island in the Caribbean Sea. It starts with some data on homicides, moves then into underlying causes, the historical briefly, followed by the current ones. This background is to promote understanding of the violence prevention measures taken and the lessons drawn, which make up the second part of the paper. Focus there will be on one particular measure, the Peace Management Initiative, an entity set up by the state but led jointly with civil society.

A. The statistics

People are murdered in Jamaica at a rate, last year, of over four a day. For that year, therefore, the total was a staggering 1471, a rate of 56/100,000 and one of the highest in the world. There are single-event slaughters of 3, 5, 7, including recently one of a three-month old infant with its mother, and another of a 10-year-old girl screaming for help from behind the locked grill of a house in flames. These last have shaken the country.

This homicidal storm had been gathering for some time, advancing from 439 cases in 1989 to 1139 in 2001. Then after a 15 percent dip came a 50 percent increase to last year's record and an even higher five murders a day in the first three months of the current year (2005), slipping in the last six months to three daily. Homicides in Jamaica fall into three main categories. Group and community conflict probably accounts for about 40 percent and much of the recent increase, with the balance divided between hard criminality (connected, that is, with extortion, robbery, drug trade or contract killing) and the inter-personal. This paper focuses on communal conflict and its prevention.

B. Background Causes

Homicidal violence is usually posed as Jamaica's number one problem. This is only true, however, if it is taken to *include* what has brought it about, the causal factor. This is especially so in the case of community violence, where the history too of its origin and growth is very relevant.

Community and group conflict is closely connected in Jamaica with party politics. The connection goes back to the 1940s, when the two main parties (formed just a few years earlier but since then dominating Jamaican politics) made their inter-party fight for power more important than the struggle against colonialism. In their partisan battles they allied themselves with criminal elements, organised community forces, and forged a clientelist politics in the distribution of work, housing and other benefits. This process was systematised in the 1960s and '70s with the building and allocation of blocks of housing for the members of only one party or the other and with the distribution of guns. What emerged, reaching their peak in a near civil war of 1980 driven by capitalist/socialist ideologies, were armed "garrison" communities and inter-community warfare along political party lines.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, as neo-liberal structural adjustment was imposed and accepted by both the main parties, overt political violence gradually declined. However, a considerable residue remains. One part of this residue is the combination of territorial divisions armed with guns and ruled by "dons" known for crimes and exercising a highly authoritarian relationship with followers. A second part is the linkage of dons with Members of Parliament in a number of prominent areas, in effect sanctioning violent and lawless behaviour. A third effect is intolerance of divergent views that is a fundamental feature of garrisons.

For a full appreciation of these bare facts, they must be put in the broader context of the central struggle of the 85 percent African majority to find its way out of the cultural and social exclusion imposed by a Euro-oriented minority. Much has been achieved since the days of slavery in respect of religion, language, music, business to some extent and a black political directorate. A rebellious spirit has forced politicians to provide benefits to supporters and even protection from the police. But the same coin has another side and it is harsh. It is the existence of an inner city of black people suffering huge unemployment, poverty, often derelict infrastructure, few social services but considerable social stigma, and a justice system characterized by vigilante or trigger-happy police, over-long court proceedings and over-crowded prisons. This inner city concentrates the very communities

at "war" so that middle class politicians can acquire and hold onto political power and the mostly lighter-skinned middle and upper classes can be secure behind their grills.

C. Escalation Factors

It is against the background of this failure of politics, society and justice system that the recent escalation in homicides must be set. Since this failure is decades old, it cannot by itself explain the escalation. On top of this load of oppressive and disrespecting wrongs, not many straws would be needed to break the camel's back, tip the scale, that is, in the direction of some extreme violence. The conditions are not there, however, for a kind of violence offering an openly revolutionary challenge to 60 years of stable democracy.

I would list those "straws" as follows:

1. A generational shift from older community leaders imbued with the political vision of the 1970s, to a younger set deprived of real parental care, exposed to a peer pressure of "badness", and hardened by the exercise of a brutal community or "jungle justice".
2. The removal of state support for community youth organizations and sport.
3. The time lag between the removal of a squad of killer cops and corrupt policing *and* the insertion of firm community policing and a cleaned up police force.
4. A greater abundance of guns.

1. Many older community group leaders, although men in their late forties and early fifties, and still called "yout'" [youth] in fluid local usage of the name, have exercised a restraining influence on the younger set. Guided by the political vision of socialism they learned under the first regime of Michael Manley (1972-80), these men have usually counselled patience in the face of the sluggish response to inner city need on the part of the Government. Their influence has waned in the recent period, however, with two of them even murdered.

The younger set, on the other hand, is the product of a breakdown of the extended family that formerly filled the gaps left by the absence of one or even both parents. Today with many teenage pregnancies, with single mothers heading 40 percent of households and

having to work, with fathers absent partly or wholly from the scene, with numerous parents migrating abroad in search of work and a better life, with little support from other relatives or from the community, children are often left to fend for themselves. The result is catastrophic – the shaping of youth by the pressure of peers who, from within the ambience of community war, define manhood as having a brand-name gun and using it for the slightest disrespect. This has now extended to killing family or community members, women and children included, of the offending male, if he cannot be found.

2. A grave delinquency on the part of the state was the cessation in 2000, at a critical moment, of direct guidance to youth organizations. This began with the reduction of resources at the responsible state agency, the Social Development Commission (SDC), and was clinched with the removal of the portfolio from the SDC to the National Centre for Youth Development (NCYD), newly established in another ministry and with no more resources than the SDC's. The SDC had had a long and fruitful association with youth organizations dating back to 1965, with youth clubs moving from a registered 400 all-island in 1970 to 1675 in 1998, even if not all would have been active.

Missing first from the SDC and now from the NCYD, both resource-starved. as both youth and social workers have constantly complained, has been the kind of broad monitoring and guidance by youth officers that many youth groups need for their sport, cultural and project activities. In the Kingston Metropolitan Region, from 308 in 1998 youth clubs have dwindled to about 200 in 2005, with not more than about half that figure estimated to be fully or partially active.

Parallel to and aggravating the reduced attention to youth clubs at the ministry level has been the policy change adopted at the Institute of Sport in 2002. From servicing all youth needs in respect of sport and recreation, including those of community youth and their leagues and competitions, the Institute had its mandate restricted to the needs of only schools and national organizations. This policy change was matched by a reduction in the number of staff at the Institute as well as by changes in the incumbents of executive and board positions. It has cut off community sport activity from state assistance.

3. Policing in Jamaica until the mid 1990s was modelled on the military methods of the British constabulary in North Ireland. Over the past three decades, every outbreak of violence was greeted with the creation of a special "hard" policing squad, and killings by police ran to over 300 in 1983, dropping in the last decade to an average 140 per year, usually on the pretext of defence in a "shoot-out". In this period not a single policeman was convicted for any of these killings. This was until 2003, when two particularly outrageous incidents ended up in court (one of them currently), and led to the scrapping of the special squad involved. Another trend from the mid 1990s has been the introduction of community policing, with the idea now generally accepted by the Police Force and its practice gradually going forward.

The removal of the special squad, without community policing fully established and its effectiveness demonstrated, had a demoralising effect on police confronted by aggressive gunmen sometimes better armed than they were. At the same time, it gave those gunmen previously overawed by the bravery or bravado of the leader of the special police squad an opening they appeared to have promptly taken advantage of.

4. Assisting the gunmen – and every little youth – in this regard has been their access to a noticeable increase in firearms, including some of the most modern and powerful. Most of these come from the United States, some until recently from nearby Haiti. It is probably a side effect of the mountains of cash brought by the trade in hard drugs in which Jamaican criminals in the U.S. have been involved and for which Jamaica is a transhipment port. X-ray machines at the ports and community raids by the police have netted stacks of weapons and ammunition but not seemingly dented what is out there.

D. The Peace Management Initiative and Lessons Learned
From what has been noted so far, one of the countering efforts from the police side will have been gathered, namely community policing strategy with its curtailment of police vigilantism. There were several other efforts, in particular programmes in the schools with community dimensions, especially one known as Change from Within. Training in

mediation by the state-supported Dispute Resolution Foundation has also been going forward.

In regard to the police there was the appointment of a British police officer to the position of Deputy Commissioner with responsibility for crime control, with other similar appointments pending. Although not very visible to the general public, this has had a definite effect not only in lowering the recent rate of homicide but also, for the longer term, in installing a general approach to crime control within the police force. Very recently, with its impact still to be seen, a bill was passed in Parliament to establish civilian oversight of the police, including police misconduct. This continues an earlier decision to work with civil society in the form of the Peace Management Initiative, to which I now turn.

The Peace Management Initiative (PMI) is the group of 12 personalities from civil society (church, university and the Dispute Resolution Foundation) and the two main political parties, several in Government (national and local), brought together in January 2002 by the Minister of National Security. It was given the mandate to head off or defuse explosions of violence in the Kingston Metropolitan Area and nearby parts of the adjoining parish of St Catherine. It has been the recipient of a small amount of funding enabling employment of four staff, three of them for field work, and the opening of an office where some of the mediation meetings are held. A similar and separate PMI was established in 2004 in Montego Bay at the other end of the island. This PMI will not be dealt with here.

When the first PMI first went into warring communities, those interested in peace came forward, specifically both the older heads and younger ones, sometimes the "shottas" (= shooters) or "warriors" themselves. The criminal-minded stayed back – they preferred the on-going shooting matches as cover for their activities. The PMI's approach was, first, to mediate between the contending groups and seek counselling for traumatised persons; secondly, to make some developmental inputs.

In its first two years of work, even in the historically conflictual context of first national, then local, government elections, homicides dropped 15 per cent, with much of this widely credited to the input of the PMI. Over the past nearly two years, as already indicated, the rate of homicides resumed its relentless climb. The PMI is still nonetheless valued, the view being that without it the homicide rate would have been even higher.

From this PMI experience I draw four lessons:

1. The *distinction between communal and criminal violence*. Much of Jamaica's community violence is the work of delinquent youth. They exhibit a brand of delinquency unlike, for example, the North American in political background, duration, ability to challenge the police, establishment of community courts and other respects. Many of these youth can be reached by caring social workers or pastors. Many have been reached by the PMI, and the PMI's efforts have brought many police (and others) to respect the distinction in policing methods, to accept that is that community violence should not be treated the same as hard criminality.

   At the same time, application of the distinction is not easy, given the uniqueness of every community. In addition, as a result of the failure of the state to take decisive developmental action in the inner city, some of those involved in the community violence have been undergoing a process of *criminalization*. This may be the result of a difference among the delinquents between a hard core of regulars known as "gunmen" and those drawn into conflicts on an ad hoc basis known as "shottas". The former are the ones probably being criminalised by prolonged economic hardship and other factors. Whatever the causal factors, the fact of such criminalizing makes the application of the basic delinquent/criminal distinction even more difficult.

2. *Sustainability*, which requires beyond mediation developmental measures in a wide range of areas – sport, skills training, employment, economic projects, parenting, cultural activities, and community organization/decision-making. Each of these areas has its specific contribution to make to human development. In

Jamaica the cultural sphere of music, song and dance, along with sport, has had special relevance in the work of the PMI. The success of a non-governmental organization (NGO) known as S-Corner Clinic in a depressed section of Kingston supports this point. The efforts of this Clinic over 15 years in health, sanitation, education and own-account projects are what have given credibility to its peace-making and drawn combatants into a community-building mode. Clearly such efforts require persistence over a period of time: conditions and attitudes built up over generations cannot be changed overnight.

3. *Respect* for lower-income community people and those involved in conflict as essential for winning their attention and acceptance. This is critical given that the social exclusion imposed on inner city people is interpreted as disrespect, which indeed it is, a profound disregard for and demeaning of their human reality. The mere show of interest by a state-appointed group from the "outside world" (its chairman bishop in particular, known from his television appearances), coupled with its genuine commitment to help to the extent that modest means allow, was enough to bring cooperation. S-Corner achieved similar results by incorporating well-known stage-show artistes in its team of mediators.

   Harvard psychiatrist James Gilligan (2001), in his very successful work with prisoners in high security places of correction, has described and analyzed the causal force of shame, another of the many words for disrespect, in provoking a violence response among those who have experienced throughout their lives nothing but poverty, ill-treatment and exclusion. (See also Wilkinson, 2005.)

4. In a developing country with a weak (though strengthening civil society), in order to spur politicians to act against their short-term interests, the probable need to move *beyond dialogue to actions of protest extending to civil disobedience*. The politicos will come to meetings. They will talk the talk endlessly. The problem has been to get them to take remedial action, to give priority to social need (rather than, e.g., to improving their offices, or to grand highway or airport projects).

Protest in the form of road blocks by citizens angered by a police killing, or by some other form of perceived injustice (e.g. neglected roads or water supply), has been a *regular feature* of Jamaican life over the past decade. In 1999, over a fuel price increase, it shut down the country for three days; and obviously, such an unplanned and spontaneous outburst can happen again. It is possible also to view the community component of the homicide rate as a kind of angry protest. For years inner city leaders and observers have been predicting that the guns would be turned against the up-town politicians and people, if nothing was done about their conditions. Increasingly, indeed, are there episodes of gunmen shooting at the police and one recently at a politician's car.

On the other hand, by no means are Jamaican inner city people articulating the need for road-block, civil-disobedience protests *over homicides* in their communities. Nor does it enter into any of the mediation efforts of the PMI. I am raising the point of civil protest neither to counsel in favour of usage – though in some situations this might well be appropriately encouraged – nor to make predictions but only to argue the *inadequacy of dialogue*, in Third World contexts, to bring about the meaningful change which alone can prevent the current violence from continuing.

While integration is absolutely essential for any true or lasting peace, the inescapable reality of racial and class divisions would seem to require from time to time the pressure provided by *confrontation* for some of their worse effects to be removed. Viewed from the side of the underdog, confrontation without violence, though challenging and difficult, is entirely possible, as Martin Luther King, civil rights marchers and many others have demonstrated. It is the oppressing class or race that has at its disposal, and readily turns to, the use of violence.

Meaningful change cannot be superficial. Implicit in the foregoing, not so much as a specific "lesson" as a broad conclusion summoning our attention, is the need for a *new paradigm* in societal relations, one that (among other features) is truly participatory rather than authoritarian, ground-up rather than (as at present) top-down, egalitarian in respect of gender, more open to differences among humans, and committed to respecting and sharing rather than controlling.

References

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