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## Jamaica attacks reveal ties between gangsters and politicians

The Jamaica attacks this week, which saw militants aligned with alleged drug trafficker Christopher 'Dudus' Coke assault a downtown Kingston police station, show how strong Jamaica's gangs have grown thanks to their involvement in local politics.



Police patrol the streets the day after a state of emergency was called in Kingston, Jamaica, Monday.

(Andrew P. Smith/Reuters)

By Sara Miller Llana, Staff writer

posted May 25, 2010 at 10:14 am EDT

Caracas, Venezuela —

With at least five people killed in the Jamaican capital of Kingston and gangsters close to alleged drug trafficker Christopher "Dudus" Coke threatening more Jamaica attacks, local officials sought to contain the spread of violence.

Two days of fighting between drug gangs barricaded in the Kingston neighborhood of Tivoli Gardens and the police were sparked by plans to extradite Mr. Coke, the alleged leader of the Shower Posse to the US. The fighting has since spread to other poor neighborhoods in the capital. Coke is suspected of being holed up in Tivoli. The Shower Posse, a successful and violent Jamaican drug distributor, was suspected of killing hundreds in the 1980s.

The unrest in Kingston is a direct challenge to the government's power by gangs that were nurtured by successive Jamaican governments. For over 30 years, leading politicians have relied on gang leaders, or "dons" in local parlance, to dominate their neighborhoods and deliver votes come election time. In return, they have been given government contracts, arms, protection from the law -- and more or less total control of their neighborhoods, which came to be called "garrison communities" as much for their strict commitment to one of the two main political parties as for the bloody turf wars the garrisons fight with each other.

Coke controls the garrison of Tivoli Gardens, which supports the ruling Jamaican Labour Party and current Prime Minister Bruce Golding, who represents Tivoli and the rest of West Kingston. Mr. Golding had resisted US demands to extradite Coke until this week. The

Gleaner, Jamaica's leading daily newspaper, described Tivoli on Tuesday as "the mini-republic of a reputed crime overlord" guarded by "heavily armed thugs."

While the immediate priority is to calm rising tensions, the long-term economic aftermath could be a bigger blow, as tourists and foreign investors are scared off.

"Jamaica is in a particularly vulnerable situation," says David Westbrook, a law professor at SUNY Buffalo who recently visited Jamaica to assess the economy. "The Jamaican economy has been deteriorating, with brief interludes of growth, for over 30 years. ... Jamaica has been caught in a series of vicious circles for years; the current violence exacerbates existing dynamics."

## Assault on Tivoli

Overnight, Jamaican soldiers assaulted Tivoli. The Gleaner reported three soldiers killed and 23 injured in the fighting. It said that residents in Tivoli reported dead gangsters as well, but didn't have casualty figures. Fighting that started in West Kingston spread to downtown, where police and soldiers repelled an attack by militants allegedly aligned with Coke on the Central Police Station. Local television showed a virtual ghost town in Kingston.

The government declared a state of emergency Sunday in parts of the capital, and Golding said the government would take "strong and decisive action" to quell the violence. The emergency decree is to last a month. The government has asked Coke to surrender and face drug- and gun-trafficking charges in the US.

## 'Turning point' in Jamaica's history

Golding said the uprising will be pivotal in the nation's history. "This will be a turning point for us as a nation to confront the powers of evil that has penalized the society and earned us the unenviable label as one of the murder capitals of the world," he said.

But more violence is still likely. Police Commissioner Owen Ellington told the Associated Press that "scores of criminals" from gangs across the island had joined the fighting in Kingston.

Milton Samuda, president of Jamaica's Chamber of Commerce, told Bloomberg News that the biggest impact could be on tourism. "I think the obvious first implication is for tourism," Mr. Samuda said. "This obviously doesn't help the business climate and it could affect potential investors."

The US State Department posted a travel alert to Kingston on May 21, warning of possible blocked airports and restricted travel.

"Violence, and the resulting uncertainty, make it very difficult to attract investment capital, particularly the sort of bricks and mortar, committed investment that is most likely to help a country develop," says Mr. Westbrook. "Investment goes elsewhere, and the country becomes even less competitive. In short, violence can have serious long-term effects on a country's economy, and indeed has in Jamaica."

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