

Jamaica needs our help

Jamaican socialist Michael Manley and our own Pierre Trudeau were pals. Both had a lot in common: Quick wits, silver tongues, dedication to socialism and attraction to the Third World's assorted passions.

But the cranky voters of both nations found, in the end, that eloquence and roseate visions just did not make up for galloping inflation, a debauched currency, insolent bureaucrats or rising taxes. First Manley, then Trudeau, were sent packing. Pierre, at least, managed to arrange a stipend for his unemployed friend, courtesy of the Canadian taxpayers.

Canada could just about bear its burden of debt, unemployment and inflation; little Jamaica, with only 2.3 million people, could not. Ever since Edward Seaga took over as Jamaica's new prime minister in 1980, he has had to wrestle with one economic crisis after another.

Manley left a debt of \$512 million, a swollen bureaucracy and a bankrupt government. Seaga was stuck with the nasty task of devaluing the dollar by 100%, raising taxes, cutting government spending and convincing Jamaica's creditors to keep on rolling over their life-sustaining loans.

To mollify these creditors, Seaga had to agree to an International Monetary Fund plan to not only slash spending and halve the deficit but also to remove subsidies on key food and fuel imports.

Removing subsidies in poor nations is risky business. When Egypt's Anwar Sadat tried to raise the price of cooking oil and bread, normally phlegmatic Egyptians rose in revolt. Elimination last year of food subsidies in the Dominican Republic provoked the worst riots there in 20 years.

Seaga's attempts at economic rationalization ignited last week's riots across Jamaica. As tourists cowered in their hotel rooms, rioters set up road blocks, burned cars, looted and generally raised hell. In part, this fracas was staged by Manley's opposition, the People's National Party. Party goons were clearly evident at roadblocks and among mobs. Manley was using the threat of street violence in an attempt to provoke a new election.

But not all the rioting was caused by the opposition. A lot of Jamaicans were expressing their growing frustration at steadily worsening economic times. Life on one of the world's most beautiful islands has not been easy.

Fifteen years ago, Jamaica was heading toward prosperity. Its principal export, bauxite, was producing a steady inflow of U.S. dollars. Tourism was increasing. Local industry, particularly food processing, was perking along. Jamaica was becoming the industrial supplier for the Caribbean.

Then, everything went wrong. Local unions managed to price Jamaican bananas and sugar right

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



out of the world market. Bauxite prices began a long-term decline and in came Manley preaching Third Worldism, anti-Americanism and a farrago of socialism-Trudeauism-Rastathink and just plain old mumbo-jumbo — all wrapped up in magical oratory.

As Manley became more stridently anti-American and the economy deteriorated, violence flared across the island. Tourists, ever a timid lot, were frightened away. Middle-class Jamaicans and the important local Chinese community departed for Toronto. Investors stayed away.

After eight years of Manley, Jamaica was an economic zombie, lurching from one crisis to another. Bread was in short supply; spare parts unobtainable. Incredibly, even sugar was often not to be found. The collapse of the Jamaican dollar made all exports painfully expensive.

Sea's efforts could not prevent the cost of food, gasoline and cooking fuel from doubling. For Jamaicans, whose budgets were already stretched to the limit, new price increases proved unbearable. Even Canadians might well riot if their weekly food bills rose by 100%.

For a growing number of Jamaicans, the only way to subsist was by turning to the spreading drug industry. Fifteen years ago you could get 18 month's hard labor for mere possession of one ganja spliff. Today, Jamaica is awash in the island's potent, mind-bending local weed.

Some experts believe that exports of ganja have now surpassed those of bauxite. Jamaica has also become a nexus for cocaine, speed and other chemicals in transit from Latin America to the insatiable U.S. market. This business has inevitably produced a new class of dealers, smugglers, corrupt officials and killers.

Under the pressure of the drug trade and economic woes, Jamaica's former colonial gentility is fast disappearing. When I lived in Montego Bay, years ago, little girls used to curtsy to adults. Today, the mood is sullen, dangerous and sad.

Some of Jamaica's best people have left for good. Try as it may, the government cannot cope with 25% unemployment, debts and a perpetual foreign-exchange crisis. And yet, surprisingly, in spite of all this Jamaica's democratic political system still thrives, her press is free and her witty citizens able to say what they will.

If any nation needs Canadian aid it is Jamaica. Instead of sending millions to petty despots in Africa or to Cuba, we should help democratic Jamaica get back on its feet. Here is a spot where we can truly do some good — and quickly. Jamaicans deserve our generous support in their time of troubles.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)



EDWARD SEAGA
One crisis after another