

Crime and Violence in Caricom Mervyn Claxton

An article in last week's Economist, entitled "In the shadow of the gallows: Trinidad debates the death penalty" <http://www.economist.com/node/18114940> underlines the widespread sentiment of people throughout the region that the death penalty should be reinstated. The Article states that Trinidad and Tobago "*suffered 472 killings last year—close to 5% of all deaths. In 1999 there were just 93. Almost everyone can name a friend or relative who has met a violent end. Last year's murder rate, of 36 per 100,000 people, was seven times that in the United States and 30 times that of Britain. But it trailed Jamaica (53), Belize (42) and tiny St Kitts-Nevis (40).*"

It is a very serious problem which concerns the Caricom region as a whole. T&T's prime minister reportedly promised to remove legal obstacles to hanging, and slated a parliamentary debate on the issue yesterday, February 18th. The Economist suggests that public anger at the extremely high level of violence in T&T is running so high that the government should have little difficulty in having a constitutional amendment adopted (albeit requiring a three-quarter's majority) to overcome a key obstacle, posed by past Privy Council rulings, to effectively implementing that policy.

Interestingly, according to the Economist, "*Many politicians privately admit that hanging will not halt crime*". The death penalty, will prove to be no more of a deterrent to potential murderers than it has in other countries throughout the world. Indeed, a number of well-documented studies provide overwhelming evidence of the utter ineffectiveness of the death penalty as a deterrent. The fact that T&T politicians recognize that but still propose such a policy is nothing less than pure demagoguery. Even Barbados, with its well-earned reputation for level-headedness and its relatively low homicide rate (8.7), appears to have yielded to popular pressure in reinstating the death penalty in 2002, although it has hanged no one since then.

Drawing attention to a statement last month, by T&T's foreign minister, that many guns arrive in the country on drug boats from South America, the Economist argues that if politicians really wanted to stem the violence, they would do better to try to stem the trade in illegal guns which, the article states, are plentiful and cheap. That is easier said than done, although it is obvious that efforts in that respect should be both reinforced and made more efficient.

For a whole host of reasons, Barbados and its sedate society are *sui generis* thus, the country's success in keeping the homicide rate to a reasonably low level, as its success in so many other respects, can hardly be emulated by other Caricom countries. For practical purposes, it cannot serve as a model. The Economist proposes Suriname for such a role: "*They [T&T and other Caricom politicians] should study Suriname, which suspended the death penalty decades ago, and suffers just four murders a year for every 100,000 people*". Although the Economist article apparently understates Suriname's homicide rate (see below) nonetheless, its homicide rate could well make other Caricom countries envious. The suggestion that Suriname should be studied may well have some merit.

Situated on the South American continent and having more or less porous land borders,

Suriname would necessarily be more exposed to penetration by South American drug traders, and the guns they bring with them, than the majority of Caricom countries which have the sea as a natural barrier. According to UNDP's Human Development Report, 2010, Suriname's homicide rate per 100,000 is 13.7, not 4 as the Economist states, see page 181 (Statistical Index). The table containing the homicide rates begin on page 180. http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Tables.pdf . UNDP's homicide rates for Jamaica (59.5) and Trinidad (39.7) are higher than those cited by the Economist, whereas St Kitts & Nevis' homicide rate (35.2) is lower. The UNDP report which was published in early December 2010, was evidently based on 2009 statistics while the Economist figure corresponds more closely (but not exactly) to the number of homicides in 2010 registered at TTCrime.com (see below), which are still provisional.

www.TTCrime.com charts the spiralling increase in the number of homicides registered in the country over the past 11 years - from 93 in 1999 to a stunning 550 in 2008 (which translates into 42.3 per 100,000); 509 (39.19) in 2009; and 485 (37.3) in 2010, with last year's figures still to be officially confirmed. <http://www.tcrime.com/stats.php> . The decline over the past three years is not significant. There was an even steeper decline between 1994 (143 homicides) and 1999, following which there was an equally steep increase, as the TTCrime chart shows.

Based on the last official figures (UNDP's), both T&T's and Jamaica's homicide rates are even higher than that of South Africa (36.5) where a survey has revealed that South Africans consider that the very high level of violence posed a grave threat to the country's democracy. Arguably, rapidly escalating levels of violence could pose a similar threat to Caricom's democracies. Astonishingly, T&T's and Jamaica's homicide rates are, respectively, one and a half times, and more than twice as high as notoriously violent Brazil (22.0). The following are some other Caricom homicide rates: Belize (34.3); Guyana (20.7); St. Lucia (16.0); Barbados (8.7).

Whether one takes the provisional number of homicides in 2010 or the higher confirmed 2009 number, they both translate **into a more than five-fold increase of murders in the course of a single decade**. If anyone had publicly stated in 1999 that such an increase would occur within the next decade, he/she would surely have been ridiculed or accused of scaremongering. If a similar five-fold increase in the number of homicides were to occur during this decade, it would result in slightly more or slightly less than 2500 homicides. If such a scenario were put to them as a possibility, most Trinitobagonians would probably consider that, under such conditions, the society would implode. That scenario is not outside the bounds of possibility, as the five-fold increase over the past decade has shown.

It is most puzzling that, despite the considerable social anger generated by the rapidly escalating homicide rate in the country (and the region as a whole), which has shaken the government from its lethargy and forced it to respond with an admittedly gesticulatory measure (the proposal to restore the death penalty), there appears to be little or no serious discussion among civil society actors in the region (if one is to judge by the activity in the blogosphere) on possible policies and measures to tackle that crucially important problem. I have raised this issue before <http://www.normangirvan.info/criminal-deportees-mervyn-claxton/> .

Violence tends to have a very insidious effect on people in a society. They are concerned about it and may even protest publicly but they soon adjust to it while taking whatever personal measures they can to try to minimize its impact on their personal lives. Human beings tend to seek normalcy and such adjustment takes place with every increase in the level of violence, to such an extent that it becomes a normal, unremarkable albeit unpleasant fact of life. That is the only explanation I can find for the relative absence of purposeful, sustained, solution-oriented discussion in the region of that game-changing problem.

There are lively on-going discussions in the region's blogosphere on a number of important public issues and problems, accompanied by suggestions on how best to deal with them. Such discussions include Caricom integration, a Caribbean popular assembly, governance, constitutional reform, national and regional decision-making, gender discrimination, a Caribbean political union, globalization, among others. If the level of violence in Caricom countries reaches a tipping point that leads to the implosion of Caricom societies, the progress made or achievements obtained in any of those important subject areas would be completely nullified. There can be no sustained development of any kind whatsoever in countries where the level violence has become a factor of great instability. Moreover countries which have suffered a complete social breakdown tend to be given over to lawlessness, armed groups, and gang warfare.

Not only are the economic and social progress of decades wiped out after a few months of such conditions but the society also becomes so coarsened that learned social behaviour, social constraint and rules of morality are discarded, permitting ordinarily decent people to commit the most atrocious acts. No society, however "civilized" it may be, is immune. That occurred in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s. It is currently happening in the Eastern Congo. It happened in the Balkans in the 1990s. Everyone becomes a potential victim or perpetrator in such conditions. In such situations, women **of all ages** are the most vulnerable. A state of lawlessness apparently gives men so inclined an opportunity to vent their latent misogyny via individual rapes and gang rapes, often accompanied by vicious, gratuitous violence - an everyday occurrence in the Eastern Congo which has suffered complete social breakdown.

As the New York Times has reported, *"In Liberia, sexual predation during the civil war was "normal." One major survey found that 75 percent of women had been raped — mostly gang-raped, with many suffering internal injuries."* Because of the coarsening of society, such acts continue long after law and order has been more or less restored.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/21/opinion/21kristof.html>

Rape is already a serious problem in the Caricom region which suggests that Caricom societies provide fertile conditions for the extremes witnessed in Liberia, if the level of violence reaches a tipping point that leads to complete social breakdown. A Joint Report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Latin America and Caribbean Region of World Bank, "Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean" (March 2007),

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLACREGTOPGENDER/Resources/Crimeandviolenceinthecaribbeanfullreport.pdf>

states the following: *"Violence against women affects a significant percentage of women and girls in the Caribbean....According to the latest available CTS [Crime Trends Surveys] data, **three of the top ten recorded rape rates occur in the Caribbean, including the top rated: the Bahamas.** All countries in the Caribbean for which comparable data are available **experienced a higher rate of rape than the unweighted average of 102 countries** responding to the CTS: 15 rapes per 100,000."*

In contrast to the world average of 15 rapes per 100,000 population, the comparative chart (see page 12 of the Joint Report) has the following figures for selected Caricom countries: Bahamas (133), St Vincent and the Grenadines (112), Jamaica (51), St Kitts and Nevis (45), Dominica (34), Barbados (25), Trinidad and Tobago (18). Moreover, Caricom already has a higher HIV infection rate than any other region in the world apart from Sub-Saharan Africa. That latter region's experience gives an indication of what is in store for the Caricom region in the scenario outlined above: *"Mass rape in sub-Saharan nations may up HIV spread."*

<http://www.health.am/aids/more/mass-rape-in-sub-saharan-nations-may-up-hiv-spread/>

Women are the cement of any society. A catastrophic degradation of their situation with consequent effects on their dignity, their self-esteem, and their physical well-being, such as has occurred in Liberia, will inevitably have a disastrous chain reaction on the entire society, its institutions, and its mores, possibly causing irreversible damage to the fabric of that society. Caricom citizens, particularly women, should not sit idly in the vain hope that their governments will take effective action to roll back the level of violence, or in the expectation that governments will come up on their own with feasible policies and measures. Any action they may take will be taken only in the face of public pressure, and such action risks either being purely cosmetic or taken for short-term political gains. Moreover, it appears that there is a dearth of actionable ideas, at governmental levels, on how to effectively tackle the problem. It is in that latter respect that Caricom civil society has a crucially important role to play. Nor should they expect regional authorities or the region's venerable personalities to fill the breach. I would be most surprised if the problem of violence in the region was on the agenda of the three-day conference on Collective Responsibility for the 21st Century, jointly organized by The Caribbean Community and the Commonwealth at UWI, Mona, which ended yesterday.

Concerned individuals, academics, professionals in all disciplines, and civil society organizations should engage in a wide-ranging, purposeful, solution-oriented dialogue with the objective of identifying pragmatic, feasible policy actions that could be taken at the national and regional levels. Based on what emerges from that dialogue, a consensus should be sought on the proposals to be submitted to individual governments and regional authorities. Those proposals and the fact that they have been formally submitted to governments and regional authorities should be widely publicized for the benefit of the public in Caricom countries, who would almost certainly give them their wholehearted support. With such public support, no Caricom government would dare to ignore the consensus proposals. Indeed, governing politicians would probably do everything possible to implement them with minimum delay. The implementation of the proposals should be closely monitored by the civil society organizations, individuals and groups who had put them forward.

