Trouble in Paradise

Here's the Jamaica you'll never see in those rum-and-reggae resort ads: A nation of rampant homophobia, where incendiary song lyrics and violence against gay people stigmatize HIV prevention and care—and increase infection.

September 1, 2007 By Lucile Scott

On a breezy porch in Kingston, the capital city of Jamaica, a handsome young man slouches in a chair, talking heatedly on his cell phone. His name is Karim, he is 22, and when asked why he has come here, to the headquarters of Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL), he pulls apart his unbuttoned shirt, exposing his muscular torso. A wide, freshly stitched scar winds from his rib cage down past his navel. "Seven guys attacked me last Wednesday [May 16], at about 2 a.m.," he says. "They stabbed me twice in the stomach and three times in the thigh. They assumed I was gay." They were right.

"It is not safe for gay people in this country," Karim says. "There is hate and pain instead of the right to live life." Karim, who did not disclose his HIV status to *POZ*, headed to JASL—which is concealed behind an unmarked stone wall and a padlocked fence—shortly after leaving the hospital. The organization has a nationwide reputation for helping all marginalized populations, not just HIV-positive people.

In Jamaica, HIV and socially condoned homophobia are hardly marginal—or unrelated. Most of the nearly 2 million tourists who flock to the country each year bypass both epidemics, shuttling straight from the airport to the resort or sunny private shore of their choice. But nearby, on sweltering streets, car radios toggle between somber analyses of pervasive crime and the floundering economy—and the hard-driving beats of dancehall music, a fusion of hip hop and reggae known principally for its macho swagger.

Dancehall has become the national language of Jamaican youth; many of the genre's international stars, including Beenie Man, Buju Banton, Elephant Man and Sizzla, have written and performed songs that ebulliently advocate attacking and murdering gay men, known as "battymen," and lesbians. Buju Banton's hit single "Boom Bye Bye" describes pouring acid on battymen before shooting them with Uzis. In 2000, a gay man was murdered while the song blasted at a street dance. Then, in 2004, several men including Banton were charged with beating a group of gay men; they were acquitted in 2006. Isaiah Laing, CEO of Supreme Promotions, which organizes Jamaica's largest dancehall concert, called Sting, says, "If the crowd isn't paying attention, the artist will say 'I shot battyman,' and everyone will throw their hands in the air and shout."

AIDS advocates have thrown up their hands too. While nearly 50% of Jamaican infections occur among women, and heterosexual sex is the dominant mode of transmission, homophobia helps fuel new cases among all groups. The national HIV infection rate is 1.5% and rising, and the virus is the leading cause of death among 15- to 44-year-olds throughout the Caribbean region. An estimated 33% of gay men in Kingston are HIV positive, but actual figures are impossible to pinpoint because many gay men who test positive do not disclose their sexual orientation to health workers for fear of violence. “[The fear] drives gay men underground. Instead of stable, monogamous relationships, they have multiple high-risk encounters,” says Anthony Hron, officer with the Jamaican Network of Seropositives (JNPlus). What’s more, many closeted gay and bisexual men have sexual relationships with women who may not suspect that their partner is having sex with others.

While violent attacks against gay people have been happening for decades, the number and magnitude of the incidences has skyrocketed since February. Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), the nation’s largest and oldest gay rights organization now receives at least one call a day reporting a hate crime. Some attacks involve a few individuals in the dark, others in daylight with mobs of up to 200 people. “2007 has been a year of relentless violence,” says Robert Carr, cofounder of the Caribbean Vulnerable Communities support network.

The fear of reprisal can have toxic health consequences. “For a gay person facing such discrimination, making the decision to get tested or to make themselves known in the health system if they have tested positive can be a formidable one,” says Brendan Bain, MD, director of the Caribbean HIV/AIDS Regional Training Network. “Heterosexual men are also reluctant to come forward because it may be assumed they are gay. Also, people who have tested positive [fearing discrimination if they disclose to a potential partner] do not want to suggest using condoms and then be asked why they are necessary.” Indeed, testing rates in all groups remain low, and approximately two thirds of positive Jamaicans don’t know their status. Now the media world hopes to force Jamaicans and their leaders to acknowledge what the Lonely Planet travel guide puts so succinctly: “Jamaica is an adamantly homophobic nation.”

In the first-ever regional media attack on HIV stigma and ignorance, The Caribbean Broadcast Corporation, working with the Kaiser Family Foundation, launched the Caribbean Broadcast Media Partnership on HIV and AIDS in the spring of 2006. Its goal: getting responsible, informed HIV messages into the area’s prime-time media slots. The partnership has since channeled education to media reps from DJs to newspaper editors. Dr. Allyson Leacock, who heads the partnership, says, “The media has so much power, it’s frightening.”

The coalition’s Live Up campaign started hawking HIV awareness this past March, with sleek public service announcements promoting condom use with the tagline “Love. Protect. Respect.” Several organizations and Jamaican entertainment personalities have signed on to the effort. These include popular musicians Rupee and Jimmy Cliff, who do not sing homophobic songs. But some spots have featured Elephant Man, who tells people to use condoms on camera, then condemns homosexuals on stage.

Some members of the media and HIV advocates contend that because 33% of those living with HIV are 15- to 24-year-olds, ads need to include the idols to whom they are most likely to respond, regardless of their past comments or ideology. Others counter that because youth are the most susceptible to the musicians' homophobic messages, the inclusion merely refuels stigma and new infections. The issue was one of many debated this past May when media officials from across the region converged on Jamaica's Montego Bay for a Caribbean Television Programming Workshop on HIV/AIDS. "[These] media campaigns create a space for [gay] people to be seen as human," says Carr. "I cannot underscore enough the importance of the media in managing viciousness."

From where does the viciousness spring? Jamaica, like many other Caribbean nations, maintains a law against gay sex, which it considers "sodomy." The statute, passed in colonial days, makes the offense punishable by 10 years in prison and hard labor. "Over the past couple of decades Jamaica has allowed itself to cultivate a sense of nationalism around homophobia," Carr adds. "It is part of who we are. But people do not appreciate the monster they created."

The Caribbean has the highest HIV infection rate of any region outside of sub-Saharan Africa. However, while Caribbean discrimination and homophobia are not isolated to Jamaica, the violence "seems to be emanating from Jamaica," says professor David Plummer, Regional Chair of HIV/AIDS Education at University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago. "Other islands are more tolerant and are trying to stop the violence from spreading, which is why people in Trinidad protested against Jamaican musicians who wanted to perform here in April." Protests against the artists have occurred in Europe and the United States since 2004, resulting in dozens of canceled concert dates for artists like Beenie Man and Sizzla—and even threats of lawsuits. The artists now generally reserve their homophobic songs for domestic crowds. In 2004, Virgin Records released an internationally aimed apology for the lyrics on behalf of Beenie Man, who quickly retracted it in the Jamaican press.

Human rights groups say the church also contributes to the homophobic climate. Jamaica has one of the world's highest murder rates, but also the most churches per square mile. The number of Christian denominations has risen from 92 to more than 600 since the 1970s, when fundamentalist American churches started shipping over money, legal advisors and speakers with antigay messages. Over the same period, the economy has stagnated; 11.3% of Jamaicans are unemployed and 19% live below the poverty line. "Even the most downtrodden person who can't feel good about anything else can feel good because they are straight," says Hron of JNPlus.

Government leaders support the antisodomy laws, and some candidates have used songs with homophobic lyrics as part of their campaigns. Many officials fear that acknowledging the violence could damage the tourist trade, which while it has taken some hits in recent years, due in part to the high crime rate, remains the country's largest industry. Tourism revenue is on track to increase this year over last. The media publishes sensational articles that promote discrimination, though newspapers have begun to include more balanced editorial rebuttals.

Like the government, religious leaders have generally kept mum. "The church. The church. The church. The church's silence on issues of protecting rights and lives is so deafening that it is

stronger and more forceful than when someone attacks a gay man," says Gareth Williams, 29, leader of J-FLAG. (His name is a pseudonym; fearing reprisal, he asked that it be used for this story.) And amid the governmental and religious repression and tension, dancehall has offered many listeners and performers the ideal soundtrack for violent release. "Kids can sing all the songs and they tend to try and act out some of the things they sing," says Junior Frasier, General Manager of Supreme Promotions.

Some contend that the intensity of Jamaica's homophobia rose along with HIV rates. "Before, being gay was not even on people's radar," says Hron. "Then HIV brought it to people's attention and they wanted a scapegoat so they could say that HIV comes from doing something wrong." But until recently, saying that you are HIV positive, regardless of your sexual orientation, was almost as perilous as being openly gay, with many positive people getting run out of their community or attacked.

However, in the last five years, education campaigns like Live Up have helped more people understand how HIV is spread and that anyone who is sexually active is susceptible, reducing the stigma—though condom usage rates remain low. Plus, more and more people know someone infected or affected, and since 2004 the government has provided access to HIV meds, reducing some of the hysteria. AIDS campaigns, however, do not specifically address gay people. "Most organizations and the government do not want to mention 'HIV' and 'gay' together publicly, so there are no prevention messages targeting gay men," says Hron. "I was working on a helpline and a kid called who was having sex with his male classmate. He thought that only men and women had to worry about using a condom and HIV." Novlet Dougherty-Reid, acting executive director of JASL, says of separating the two issues: "The ads are talking to their audience. If the ads seem gay, people will flip the channel. They are trying to impact people where they can, and we can bring in gay issues subtly over time." Most positive people still face a litany of challenges and hardships that have little to do with sexual orientation. "Positive people are still denied health care or their medical confidentiality is broken; they can't get mortgages or health insurance; they get fired and there are so few legal protections," says Carr. "There is a poor sense of justice in Jamaica."

JNPlus was founded in 1996 to help positive people advocate for themselves through workshops, meetings and public speaking. It has approximately 350 members, an estimated 90% of whom are un- or underemployed, many citing poor health and discrimination as the cause. Most have trouble accessing health care and other essentials. At a JNPlus advocacy workshop this May, volunteers learned how to empower themselves and bring that message of empowerment home. "We let them know that they have the right to help themselves, the right to care and treatment, the right to work and to have their children attend school," says Rose, 42, who, like the other attendees, asked that her last name not be mentioned. She was diagnosed in 1993 and has volunteered with JNPlus for nearly a decade. "Because of stigma people feel they don't have the rights to these things." Granville, 48, gathered scraps from a free buffet during the lunch break to bring home to his dog. "My wife was diagnosed when she was pregnant in 2000. I tested positive a few months later," he says. "The baby was HIV positive and only lived to be 9 months. There was no treatment then. My wife died in a mental hospital. A nurse I knew told my church about my status and people

stopped visiting and shaking my hand. But now I'm on treatment and I just got married again."

Throughout the workshop, Paula, 34, diagnosed in 2005, lowered her head onto a table to fight the nausea from her pregnancy. Like Granville's wife, Paula tested positive while pregnant, highlighting that people still forgo regular testing and many cases remain undiagnosed. "Yeah, man, this will be my fourth [child]. The third died. I didn't know my status and I breast fed her." This time she is on meds and educated. "Not too long ago a guy was thrown off a moving bus because he was positive. But it's a lot better than it used to be."

A campaign launched last year called "Getting on With Life," sponsored by the Jamaican Ministry of Health, has shown the names and faces of two HIV-positive people on billboards and in print ads and TV spots, previously unthinkable. Ainsley Reid, one of the two people featured, says, "A few weeks ago the entire staff of a restaurant wanted to come out and touch me and make sure I was real."

In 2001, Reid, who is married and works with the Caribbean Conference of Churches on developing a cohesive response to HIV, was stabbed and nearly died. The perpetrators told him they wanted to kill all people with AIDS.

J-FLAG's Williams adds that he has been harassed and beaten by police officers multiple times. "If any gay people are suffering from harassment [by police] they should report it and we will investigate it properly," says John McLean, assistant commissioner of police. The previous leader of J-FLAG, Brian Williamson, was murdered in 2004. And in 2005, iconic Jamaican AIDS activist Steve Harvey was murdered when a group of muggers realized he was gay and shot him in the back of the head.

J-FLAG's current leader, Williams, identified his body. "After, the police showed up at my apartment and told me to my face they were going to kill me because I was abattyman," says Williams, who reports that he once witnessed policemen push a gay man into a mob of 150 people who then killed him. Adds Carr: "The tension is very high, but it is because now people are actually talking about it. Even in the southern United States during the civil rights movement there was more violence when people were pushing for change."

J-FLAG and other human rights groups are working toward a unified response to the attacks. They hosted a religious forum this past May, and afterward several major clerical leaders, including internationally known political peacemaker Bishop Herro Blair, issued statements reaffirming their belief that being gay is wrong—but so is killing people. Also this spring, the Kingston police force began offering sensitivity training. "There have been a number of attacks recently which have brought into focus the difficulties that people in the [gay] community face," says commissioner McLean, who moved to Jamaica from the United Kingdom. "We are looking to make sure that anyone can call the police regardless of sexual orientation. I don't underestimate the challenge."

While the Jamaican Prime Minister, Portia Simpson Miller, and other top-level officials have remained silent, Peter Figueroa, head of the Ministry of Health's HIV and AIDS program, has

argued for repealing the sodomy law. “It’s an outdated act and it compounds the stigma,” he says.

As for the musicians, a few of the larger concerts, including Sting, have begun banning homophobic songs. In June, Beenie Man, Sizzla and Capleton signed an agreement promising that they would stop performing the songs if gay rights groups halted international campaigns against them (Banton, Elephant Man and others refused to sign). “We know that we have a responsibility and we have to do better,” says Supreme Promotion’s Laing, stretching out in a three-piece suit on his office’s leather sofa. He adds of the recent explosion of violence, “There’s always been violence. But now [gay people] are throwing [their orientation] in your face and taking it out in public.”

On a recent transatlantic Air Jamaica flight, offering free champagne and feel-good reggae standards, a Jamaican man named Anthony scrolled through his iPod, occasionally attempting to strike up conversations with his female neighbors. He says of gay rights: “Homophobia, it’s just overtaken me. That’s how it is in Jamaica. We don’t accept [gay people].” When asked why, he replies: “To each their own, right?”

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