

US questions Jamaica's reliability in drug fight

Reprinted from **YAHOO!** NEWS

AP Associated Press

By *MIKE MELIA*, Associated Press Writer Mike Melia, Associated Press Writer – Tue Mar 2, 5:54 pm ET

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico – Jamaica's reluctance to hand over an alleged crime boss is straining relations with the United States, which is questioning the Caribbean nation's reliability as an ally against drug trafficking.

The two governments have been negotiating over Christopher "Dudus" Coke since the U.S. requested his extradition in August to face arms and drug trafficking charges in New York. The U.S. Justice Department calls him one of the world's most dangerous drug kingpins.

In a report Monday, the State Department suggested corruption could be holding up the extradition request. It noted Coke has ties to the governing Jamaica Labor Party and essentially controls the barricaded Tivoli Gardens neighborhood in west Kingston, the home constituency of Prime Minister Bruce Golding.

The International Narcotics Control Strategy Report said the handling of the request has "called into question Kingston's commitment to law enforcement cooperation with the U.S."

Golding said Tuesday that the extradition request has been held up by concerns over how some evidence against Coke was obtained. In particular, he contended that intercepted communications were handled in violation of Jamaican law. While island officials raised this issue in several meetings, the U.S. has yet to present adequate evidence, he said.

Under questioning from opposition lawmakers, Golding said that unless the U.S. presents other evidence, his government will not sign off on the extradition request.

"If I have to pay a political price for it, then I will," he said.

The standoff has highlighted the lingering affiliations between criminal gangs and Jamaica's two major political parties, which rely on "community dons" to produce votes during elections.

The State Department report, which names Jamaica a major transit point for South American cocaine, says the influence of gangs hinders the island's own anti-drug efforts. While police have successfully dismantled some organized crime groups, they have been unable to focus on some masterminds, the report says.

"This is due to the fact that these leaders are afforded community and, in some cases, police and political protection," the report says.

With the American government's frustration clearly growing, some observers say there are signs Washington has begun to retaliate.

David Rowe, a Jamaican-born lawyer in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, said signs of the deteriorating relationship include the fact that the U.S. has not filled the vacant ambassador's position in Kingston and reports that U.S. visas belonging to top officials from the governing party have been canceled.

"Jamaica doesn't have any options. They receive a lot of bilateral aid. Many Jamaicans have American visas," he said. "How could one extradition be worth the Jamaica-U.S. relationship?"

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Embassy in Kingston, Patricia Attkisson, said she could not comment on claims regarding retaliation. She said negotiations on the extradition request are continuing.

Embassy representatives were not available later Tuesday to discuss Golding's characterization of the case evidence. But the State Department report charges that Jamaica has made unfounded allegations questioning U.S. compliance with island law.

Coke, 40, the alleged leader of the Shower Posse gang, faces federal charges in New York City of conspiracy to distribute cocaine and marijuana and conspiracy to illegally traffic in firearms. The charges carry a maximum sentence of life in prison.

U.S. authorities allege that under Coke's leadership, Shower Posse members have sold marijuana and crack cocaine in the New York area and elsewhere and funneled profits back to him.

Associated Press Writer Howard Campbell in Kingston, Jamaica, contributed to this report.