

# The Great Chi-Chi Man Debate

By. I. Jabulani Tafari

Jamaica continues to remain in the bulls-eye center of a raging storm because of the overt and public rejection of gay and bi-sexual lifestyles by the government, people and music industry of the island. Due to this ongoing controversy, a Californian gay-wrongs lobby group has now launched a Boycott Jamaica campaign in the city of San Francisco, discouraging patronage of the Reggae Island's exports - particularly Red Stripe beer. The aim of the boycott is to pressure the Jamaican government and private-sector interests to clamp down on an alleged increase in attacks on Jamaican homosexuals.

The latest boycott was prompted by a U.S. State Department report published in February 2009, which cited an escalation in violent attacks against homosexuals in Jamaica. A spokesman for the lobby group said it aimed to spread its Boycott Jamaica message in other US cities including New York and Chicago.

The boycott has targeted Red Stripe beer, mainly because of the product's international prominence, which is quite unfair to Red Stripe for all kinds of reasons. The lobby group is attempting to cut sales of Red Stripe in gay bars and restaurants in San Francisco within 30 days. A spokesman said the gay-wrongs group would also try to dissuade Americans from holidaying in Jamaica, precisely because tourism is one of the island's biggest foreign-exchange earners.

Ironically, J-FLAG, the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-sexuals and Gays has come out against the boycott in San Francisco. J-Flag says it deplores the boycott, especially since Red Stripe has already withdrawn support from dancehall entertainers who lyrically promoted violence against gays. A spokesperson said the Jamaican organization asked its Californian counterpart not to go through with the boycott, but the San Francisco group went ahead anyway. Why they won't listen to advice from their own, no one knows.

In response to the boycott, Red Stripe's head of corporate relations, Maxine Whittingham-Osborne, says Red Stripe was surprised by the apparent random targeting of the company by the gay advocates. She is reported as saying, "Over the years, by our actions and our policies, we have demonstrated that we do not advocate any bias or prejudice against any individual or group(s)."

In the meantime, press reports say Jamaican Prime Minister Bruce Golding has described gay advocates as "perhaps the most organized lobby in the world". True words indeed. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Golding, holding true to form, has vowed not to yield to mounting pressure for him to erase buggery as a crime from the Jamaican law books.

He explained that "Every society is shaped and defined by certain moral standards and the laws that evolve in that society are informed by a framework that the society recognizes." He asked, "If we start to yield; if we start to liberalize in the direction that strong organized lobby would insist that we should, then where do you draw the line?"

The Prime Minister was speaking in Parliament while closing the debate on the sexual offences bill. Under the proposed sexual offences act, grievous sexual crimes such as rape, carnal abuse and incest, will attract the maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Golding is quoted as declaring: "We are not going to yield to the pressure, whether that pressure comes from individual organizations, individuals, whether that pressure comes from foreign governments or groups of countries, to liberalize the laws as it relates to buggery."

Prime Minister Golding also promised that homosexuals would not be targeted because of their lifestyle: "We have a duty to protect people in the country and, therefore, we will never support or condone either the acts of violence or threats of violence or intimidation in any shape or form against persons because of their sexual preferences or lifestyle." Being gay in Jamaica is not an automatic death sentence. Contrary to what many uninformed foreigners may think, they are many well-known Jamaican gays in public and academic circles, who are known homosexuals but who have never been attacked or killed. Maybe, because they don't promote or flaunt their sexuality publicly, nor do they go around soliciting little boys off the streets.

Meanwhile, according to research from the U.K. based Out Now Consulting, the gay honeymoon market

hit an amazing £47.2 million in 2007. The total value of all 2007 leisure travel spending for gays in the U.K. is estimated at a whopping £4.7 billion. Comparable research for the U.S. market suggests a similarly large total of \$64.5- billion in annual spending by the American gay leisure-travel market. Although the Caribbean is an attractive destination, and Jamaica is known as a tourist paradise, many gays quite rightly hold concerns about how welcome or unwelcome they will be. As a result, many gay cruises sail right on by the supposedly hostile and homophobic isle.

However, because of their increasing popularity and growth in numbers, gay consumers and the gay travel industry have become an attractive and lucrative target market. So while the government and society is officially 'anti-gay', and while gay and lesbian activists in San Francisco are trying to get tourists to boycott Jamaica, a number of villas, small hotels and guest houses spread across the island are already tapping into the so-called 'pink dollars' provided by the gay travel market itself. Plagued by the global financial crisis and a downturn in ordinary tourism, at least eight gay/lesbian-friendly smaller Jamaican resorts have opened their doors to all and sundry without distinction in an attempt to grab some of that US\$64.5-billion in annual gay leisure travel

spending. This trend, as unwelcome as it undoubtedly is, is bound to spread.

Regardless, as the Great Chi-Chi Man Debate continues to rage, the gay-wrongs lobby groups have been stepping up their activities non-stop. For example, members of J-FLAG recently completed a speaking tour of public forums across the U.S. organized by OUTfront, the Amnesty International program on lesbian and gay rights. The tour was part of an ongoing Amnesty campaign to end homophobic violence and promote LGBT human rights in Jamaica. Maybe the Jamaican government needs to mount its own public relations campaign in order to make its case before the court of international public opinion. The culture clash continues.

PRO GAY ACTIVISTS ON A 'PINK' DEMONSTRATION OUTSIDE THE JAMAICAN CONSULATE IN NEW YORK CITY





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