

Jamaica braces for Haitian asylum seekers

JAMAICA, already struggling to fend off a debt crisis and cope with the global economic slump, is girding for a flood of Haitian asylum seekers displaced by Tuesday's powerful, magnitude-7 quake that flattened much of Haiti's capital city of Port-au-Prince -- home to nearly two million citizens or almost a third of the country's population.

Jamaica House, in a statement Wednesday night, said coastal surveillance for asylum seekers had begun offshore the parishes of St Mary and Portland, the latter being one of Jamaica's nearest points to its western Caribbean neighbour.

According to the statement, "preparations have been put in place to receive, screen and treat such persons". The 1951 Refugee Convention, to which Jamaica is a signatory, bars governments from returning asylum seekers to a country where they face danger. Yesterday, as the extent of the destruction in Haiti became clearer and fears grew that the death toll could reach as high as 100,000, with hundreds of thousands left homeless, permanent secretary in the Ministry of National Security Richard Reese said that a facility has already been identified to house Haitians likely to seek refuge here. He refused to disclose the location or capacity but said that co-ordination was being done in conjunction with the Jamaica Red Cross Society. "We had a briefing yesterday (Wednesday) with all the key agencies and we have another briefing with the government agencies and non-governmental organisations next Tuesday to put all the relevant parts together," Reese told the Observer. "So far everything is in train, but a lot hinges on the relief and reconstruction of Haiti."

Meanwhile, Reese said the surveillance team would include the police, local government authorities and the citizenry. "...So what it means is that any individual who observes the arrival of a refugee, is required to alert the police so that the police can receive the refugee and arrange for the reception team to process them and take them to the camp," he told the Observer. He said given the extent of the devastation in Haiti, it was likely that those who turn up on Jamaica's shores would be undocumented.

"In such instances, we would apply the relevant procedure," he said. Reese, meanwhile, warned that the surveillance team would be on the lookout for those who want to use the situation as a cover for their criminal activities. "The surveillance covers not only refugees, but also persons who are making illegal entries and smuggling. It's two-fold, and everyone is alert," said Reese. Criminals in Jamaica and Haiti have an active guns-for-drugs trade which see the Jamaicans exchanging marijuana for high-powered weapons. The activity was blamed for a significant portion of Jamaica's 1,680 murders committed last year.

And as the security ministry prepares for the inevitable, the permanent secretary said an account (# 20499) has been set up at the Bank of Nova Scotia to accept cash donations to care for Haitians when they come. "We are only accepting cash at this time because when people start giving ad hoc donations that will create a logistical challenge in terms of sorting, repackaging, storing, transporting and transferring the donations," he said. "The money we can use to purchase the necessary supplies, and that can also stimulate the local economy," he told the Observer, adding that when other donations are required, an announcement would be made. Jamaica was only four years ago forced to find the wherewithal to deal with hundreds of Haitians who came in by boatloads, intent on escaping a bloody political uprising sparked by the ousting of then president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The majority of the Haitians have since returned home.