

The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

Official: Corruption has reached 'systemic' levels in Jamaica, calls for urgent changes

By Associated Press, Wednesday,
March 23, 7:48 PM

KINGSTON, Jamaica — An independent investigator for Jamaica's parliament on Wednesday called for the creation of a special agency to fight corruption, asserting official graft has reached "systemic" levels in the Caribbean country.

Contractor General Greg Christie said there is credible evidence Jamaica's law enforcement and anti-corruption institutions have been ineffective in netting the "big fish" involved in practices that corrode the island's society.

"For years, and despite having on paper what some might regard to be a relatively comprehensive anti-corruption institutional framework, corruption in Jamaica, particularly the corruption that is perceived to be taking place in high places, has enjoyed a field day," Christie said at the close of a two-day regional anti-corruption conference.

Christie, whose position comes with extensive statutory powers of investigation and subpoena, said it is crucial the government recognize that efforts in combating graft have fallen short.

He said Jamaican leaders must show political will to effectively battle corruption, which has "already condemned the great majority of Jamaicans to a future of relative poverty and dismal hopelessness."

The U.S. State Department says corruption among Jamaican public officials remains a major concern.

"The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption; however, corruption is entrenched, widespread and compounded by a judicial system that is poorly equipped to handle complex criminal prosecutions in a timely manner," according to this year's U.S. International Narcotics Control Strategy Report on Jamaica.

Karen Hilliard, director of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Jamaica, told conference attendees that a recent poll says most Jamaicans believe their public officials are corrupt.

At Tuesday's opening ceremony, Prime Minister Bruce Golding lauded support from Jamaica's partners in battling drug traffickers and said that stopping corruption requires a coalition.

"It involves the government; it involves the media; it involves civil society and it requires, importantly, a

recovery and a rebuilding of the values and standards that we currently face in our society against corruption,” Golding said. “Legislation alone can’t do that.”

Last year, Jamaica improved its ratings on Transparency International’s corruption survey but still ranked poorly. Jamaica was No. 87, up from 99, in the watchdog group’s report. The island scored the same as India, Albania and Liberia.

Christie said the improvement is insufficient.

“It should now be crystal clear that the battle against Jamaica’s systemic corruption cannot be effectively won unless and until the anti-corruption institutional framework is radically and comprehensively transformed,” he said.

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