

EDITORIAL - JDF losing its shine

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Two years ago, in the latest [published](#) survey as part of Vanderbilt [University's](#) project to track attitudes to democracy in this hemisphere, research at the University of the [West Indies](#), Mona, found the [Jamaica](#) Defence Force (JDF) to be among the most trusted institutions in [the island](#).

It scored better than the political parties, Parliament, the Government and the judiciary, among others.

The reason for this, we believe, is that in an environment of seeming disorder, the JDF is perceived as an organisation built on competence and discipline. Unlike the police force, soldiers are generally expected to do what is right, and if they err, to quickly make it right.

The JDF, we fear, is in danger of squandering that reputation with a number of missteps in recent times, mostly surrounding how it has communicated with the public about its operations in the Tivoli Gardens raid to remove Christopher 'Dudus' Coke. It has been caught being far less than honest, if not brazenly lying on the matter.

BUSTED OVER MORTARS

The latest of these surfaced last week with the revelation that the JDF lied to the Jamaican public in 2010 about the kind of ordnance it used in the fight with Coke's militia. The immediate source was a United States journalist who used that country's access to information law to gain cables from America's embassy in Jamaica, reporting to Washington on the Tivoli event.

As it turned out, the JDF fired mortars, a fact that the current deputy chief of staff, Brigadier Rocky Meade, did not, at the time, tell the truth about, however he may have packaged the lie.

The then Colonel Meade was not only the spokesman for the operation but was intimately involved in its execution. When people in the area reported heavy explosions, he professed ignorance and implied that such discussion was out of bounds.

The JDF now admits that mortars were fired, but as a diversion and not in areas to cause casualties. The army's use, the suggestion is, helped in the safety of the operation. Perhaps!

Nonetheless, the use of mortars, with live munitions, in an urban environment, on the face of it, would seem potentially dangerous for civilians.

CONTROVERSIAL DEATHS

Indeed, the fact remains that the Tivoli engagement, though a legitimate operation to assert the authority of the Jamaican State, turned controversial. More than 70 civilians died. There are claims that some were extrajudicially killed.

There has been no accounting by the security forces. Moreover, much of the behaviour by them, including the JDF, seems to be deliberate obfuscation.

For instance, there was the sense that the army stalled in providing information on the collateral operation, days after Tivoli, and miles away from that west Kingston community, that ended in the death of 63-year-old accountant Keith Clarke. Mr Clarke was shot 20 times - including 15 entry wounds to the back - at his home by soldiers searching for Coke.

People do not expect the operational minutiae of security operations. It, however, builds trust and public confidence if they know they can depend on the truth, when accountability is necessary.

For instance, it was similarly the same foreign source who revealed that a US observation aircraft helped to provide intelligence during the Tivoli operation. Its operation was obvious. But at the time, Brigadier Meade denied its presence.

An enquiry into Tivoli may be necessary.

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