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**COMMONWEALTH RELATIONS OFFICE PRINT 14<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 1966**

**CRO Ref: 2WID 20/340/1 Copy no.46**

**JAMAICA: STATE VISIT OF THE EMPEROR HAILE SELASSIE 21-24 APRIL<1966**

*British High Commissioner in Jamaica to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations*

**SUMMARY**

1. The official arrangements for the visit were considerably disrupted by the Rastafarians, who believe the Emperor to be God. A description of this movement (Paragraphs 1-3)
2. Difficulties in controlling the exuberant and disorderly crowds; good humour of the police and military. (Paragraphs 4-6)
3. The Emperor's reference to the common origins in Africa of Jamaicans and Ethiopians was well received. (Paragraph 7)
4. The Emperor publicly praised British policy in bringing colonial territories to independence. (Paragraph 8)
5. An anodyne communiqué. (Paragraph 9)
6. What did the Emperor think of the Rastafarians? And what did the Rastafarians think of him? If enough of them are disappointed they may begin to participate in Jamaican domestic politics with unpredictable results. (Paragraphs 10-11)
7. The Jamaican government did not handle the visit too well, and it has not worked to their internal political advantage, as they hoped it would. (Paragraph 12)

(No.5 Confidential)

Sir *Kingston 20 May, 1966*

I have the honour in this dispatch to report that His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, accompanied by an official entourage of 12, including two of his grandchildren, Her Royal Highness Imebet Sofyia Desta and His Highness Prince Mikael, paid a State visit to Jamaica from 21-24 April. The visit was the occasion for some remarkable and unprecedented scenes resulting in the intervention in official arrangements by the Rastafarians, the Jamaican religious sect who look upon the Emperor as their God; the delay in reporting, for which I apologise, is due to a large extent to the need for careful enquiry into the unexpected aspects of the visit and their local repercussions.

2. It is no secret that the Jamaican government received barely one month's notice of the Emperor's intended visit. Their feelings must have been mixed. Satisfaction that a State visit by a ruler of the Emperor's standing would enhance the prestige of Jamaica was diluted by irritation at the thought that Jamaica was indirectly beholden to Trinidad for this blessing; for despite Mr Sangster's statement that he had invited the Emperor two years previously, the plan for a Caribbean visit started from an initiative by Dr Williams. Furthermore, it was

hardly surprising that Jamaicans should feel their capacity for hospitality was being put to something of a strain by another Royal visit fitted between that of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh in March and the projected return of the Duke for the Commonwealth Games in August. Lastly there was a major reservation about an altogether unpredictable element – the effect the Emperor’s visit would have upon the Rastafarians. These hesitations, of course, were kept discreetly below the surface. I attach a summary of the programme\* (largely adapted from the one that had proved so successful during the visit of Her Majesty the Queen) which was designed to do full honour to the Royal visitor.

3. Because the antics of the Rastafarians did indeed dominate the visit, this dispatch must begin with a brief account of the background and the philosophy of these people. The central objective of the Rastafarians is the return of black Jamaicans to Africa, whence their ancestors were transported as slaves. Members of the movement regard Jamaican domestic politics as an irrelevance. Attempts at providing social and economic improvements for them, as for the general public in Jamaica, arouse their active disapproval, as palliatives that might tempt the weaker brethren to compromise with the allurements of Babylon, a term loosely descriptive of the local “establishment”. In 1930 Ras Tafari was crowned as the Emperor Haile Selassie. The event seemed to be a clear fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy, as interpreted by Marcus Garvey, the prophet of the Back to Africa movement, that the day of deliverance of the black race would dawn when a black king was crowned in Africa. Despite the easily verifiable facts that the Emperor was the brown-skinned Semitic ruler of a country in which the enslavement of negroes was still practised and that the ancestors of Jamaican negroes had come from West Africa, not North-East, the movement took the Emperor’s name and adopted the Emperor as its “God and King”. The genuine Rastafarians are gentle in manner and pacific in intent, and summarise their beliefs in the greeting “Peace and Love”. They are split into a number of sects which, despite doctrinal differences in points of detail, share a common belief in the Negus’ divinity, outward distinguishing marks of beards and uncut hair, and a partiality for smoking ganja (marijuana). The riff-raff of Jamaica have found the movement a convenient focus round which they can group themselves to express their resentments, and there are sizeable groups of criminals and unemployables, possibly in some localities more numerous than the genuine brethren, whose long hair and appetite for ganja make them superficially indistinguishable from the true brethren. Members of these groups have in the past been responsible for a number of well-publicised disturbances in Jamaica: notably in 1960 when two British soldiers were killed and two wounded in the course of a prolonged operation against a “Rasta” gang in the Red Hills area of Kingston; and in April 1963 when exaggerated accounts of the implications of an attack by five or six Rastas on a petrol station in Montego Bay, in the course of which four people including two policemen were murdered, led for a time to emotional talk of a “Rastafarian uprising”. The movement is currently estimated to number between 10,000 and 15,000 including its less desirable criminal fringe; but no estimate can be more than an informed guess as it is possible that the true figure is well in excess of that estimate. In any event, the Jamaican authorities were right in fearing that the arrival of their God-King amongst this amorphous crowd of visionaries and hooligans was likely to lead to trouble.

4. On the night of 20 April about 10,000 people, predominantly Rastafarians, took possession of Palisadoes Airport at Kingston. By the time the police and the military arrived on the following morning to make their preparations for the ceremonial reception of the Emperor, the crowd were fully settled in and had occupied whole areas where they had no right to be. To dislodge them would have required the use of force. The Government, obviously anxious to be conciliatory to a sizeable body of voters in a pre-election period, had already enjoined the police to treat the Rastafarians gently during the visit, and the use of force by now was in any case out of the question. A preliminary pitched battle at the airport would hardly have started the Royal tour off on a happy note. The security problem was further complicated because the Emperor made a visit to Barbados, which meant he arrived three hours later than originally announced; and it rained heavily shortly before he arrived. Mr Sangster has since told me that these two factors were responsible for most of the confusion that ensued, but I think that there would have been confusion anyway; the Jamaican Government clearly badly miscalculated the consequences of the release of uninhibited Rastafarian emotion. As the Emperor's aircraft taxied towards the reception point, the crowd jumped down from the rooves of the airport building, burst the barriers and surged towards the aircraft, overwhelming the welcoming VIPs, the police, the Guard of Honour and the band. The Governor-General and the Acting Prime Minister had to fight their way through the crowd to greet their Royal guest inside the aircraft. To get him out of the aircraft was rather more difficult. A Rastafarian leader was brought to the gangway whence he vainly besought the people to make way, but a path was only finally cleared after the Guard of Honour who had throughout been standing imperturbably at ease, were ordered to break ranks and force the mob back with their rifles. The Governor-General escorted the Emperor through the narrow passage thus formed and took him away to King's House, followed not by the planned State Procession, but by a disorderly jam of cyclists, lorries and motorcars, official and unofficial.

5. The police and military behaved with exemplary restraint throughout these events. They put on as cheerful a public face as they could muster as they enforced some measure of orderliness, and it was noticeable that they continued to handle the crowds with the same disciplined god humour throughout the whole visit. Subsequently and privately, their officers have been less restrained in their descriptions of the inhibitions under which they were forced to operate. The wild scenes at the airport, only slightly less wild scenes at the stadium in the afternoon and a disagreeable incident at Spanish Town in which members of the crowd were injured received extensive television and radio coverage and were viewed with much distaste and some apprehension by the more staid members of the Jamaican public.

6. All subsequent ceremonies took place against a background of persistent Rastafarian noise punctuated by spasmodic attempts of groups of Rastafarians at least to see the Emperor at close quarters, if not to touch his divine person. There was at times genuine concern about the Emperor's physical safety but the police and military were permitted by the politicians to exercise their own judgement and the crowd control and security measures were effectively tightened up as the tour progressed; on the last day at Montego Bay nobody passed the police lines.

7. Although most of the planned events of the tour consisted of innocuous civilities there were occasions when a note was struck which evoked a ready response from non-Rastafarian Jamaicans. In the course of his speech to Parliament, the Emperor's reference to the "bond of brotherhood" between Jamaica and Ethiopia – "the people of Jamaica have by and large originated from Africa" - drew a burst of applause from Members of Parliament. One member of the Senate has since proposed in all seriousness that the Queen should be replaced as monarch of Jamaica by the Emperor but no-one has taken him seriously. This enthusiasm for Jamaica's African heritage is of course symptomatic of the much talked of Jamaican search for an identity; but the enthusiasm has a more than usually powerful head of steam behind it in the present pre-election period and its Parliamentary manifestations reflect a cynical attempt at political exploitation of such popular sentiments about international black solidarity as may exist.
8. Britain came in for mention at one stage during the tour, and it is agreeable to be able to report that the Emperor had some kind things to say in public about us. In the course of his farewell speech at Montego Bay he paid tribute to the record of the British Government in bringing its colonies along an orderly path to independence. These sentiments were reported as a leading item on the radio news bulletins but escaped all but the briefest mention in the Press.
9. I attach a copy of the joint communiqué which was issued at the end of the visit\* (not printed). As will be seen it is an anodyne document its main points being gratification over the establishment of (nominal) diplomatic relations between Jamaica and Ethiopia, cultural and other exchanges, opposition to the Smith regime in Rhodesia and support for the United Nations.
10. The Rastafarians must have made a strong and rather curious impact on the Emperor. As usual, he displayed little emotion (although he was reported in the Press to have been moved to tears by the affection and enthusiasm of the mob at the airport, people who were close to him have described this as a newspaper fabrication) but Jamaican officials who accompanied him throughout report that he was flattered at being regarded as a God. He has of course always denied his divinity and has never shown any enthusiasm for welcoming the Rastafarians as settlers in Ethiopia. Flattered or not, I imagine that three days' experience of the undisciplined abandon of his self-appointed worshippers must have removed any thought he might ever have had of offering them even a small piece of land for token Rastafarian settlement. In his final message to Mr Sangster and the Jamaican Government he described the scenes that greeted him as "a splendid and spontaneous welcome". The Press reported that one of his staff called it "a disgraceful demonstration". Whether this latter description reflected the Emperor's own view of the proceedings or simply indicated that his staff feared for his safety is open to question. I should welcome any observations that Her Majesty's Ambassador in Addis Ababa may have to make on what the Emperor thought of his reception here.

11. There is no doubt that the physical presence of the Emperor among the Rastafarians has given many of them food for thought. Insulated from reality, several thousand miles removed from the Emperor, they had in the past been able to develop a fairytale religion whose fantasies had never been put to the test of a confrontation with the God that they adopted. They seemingly anticipated something between Jehovah and Cassius Clay. What they got was undoubtedly disappointing. God was brown, not black – a Babu, as one disillusioned spectator was heard to describe him. He was, for God, much too short. He was very silent and outwardly emotionless. As Mr Sangster put it to me, the Rastafarians were disappointed to find him “more Lamb than Lion”. There is now, I understand, much theological speculation among the Rastafarians. Some frankly doubt the Emperor’s divinity. Others hold that since he was so evidently un-godlike, he was not Haile Selassie at all but a front man put up by the Government to hoodwink the faithful. Others adhere to their original beliefs and despite the Emperor’s physique, pigmentation, and denials that he is anything other than a humble practicing member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, take the line that even though he said he is not God, and may in fact believe that he is not God, he is still God, unaware of his godhood. Related to the uneasiness promoted by this wave of religious doubt is the thought that must have occurred to at least some of the movement, that any likelihood of their being “repatriated” to Ethiopia has now faded forever. These considerations are presumably a subject of earnest discussion among the movement’s leaders and must equally be causing concern among their criminal camp-followers who have customarily made some attempt to justify their disorderliness by a claim to divine inspiration. The outcome of all this remains to be seen; it may be a ganja-sodden rationalisation that will lead merely to business as usual: but there is a possibility that, for the first time, the Rastafarians abandoning their dreams of African repatriation under the auspices of a black God, will decide to take an active part in Jamaican affairs. If they do, and if they are exploited by the wrong people, they could be a disruptive force of considerable strength.
  
12. It is clear that the Jamaican Government came out of the visit rather badly. They must have hoped to gain internal political advantage, particularly amongst the black majority of the population, from a successful tour of a reigning monarch who had the double advantage of being African and conservative. But they miscalculated badly as regards the reaction of the crowd and particularly the Rastafarians, and loss of control meant loss of face with the general public, at least until the security authorities reasserted themselves. Indeed the extraordinary mob scenes of the earlier part of the visit badly frightened the middle class establishment who saw in them a portent of what they have always most feared – an unruly upsurge of the black mass from below. Even if these effects are not long-lasting the visit has not improved the image of a government which has lost ground recently and in its handling of current problems has given an impression of fumbling and indecisiveness.
  
13. I am sending copies of this dispatch to Her Majesty’s Representatives in Washington, Addis Ababa and Port of Spain.  
I have, etc J.D.Murray.