

## Not an Easy Road for Buju

International reggae star Mark 'Buju Banton' Myrie has strongly denied any involvement in the illegal drugs trade.

Buju, who has been one of the standard bearers for reggae music for more than a decade, made the declaration through his legal representative yesterday as he prepared for his first day in court.

"My client says he is absolutely innocent of each of the allegations that the (United States) government has made," attorney-at-law Herbert E Walker III said late yesterday.

Defence team on the ball

Walker, who has been retained to represent Buju, said he was looking forward to the trial.

"You can tell your readers that his defence team is working night and day to protect his interest as he vigorously and vehemently denies all of the allegations," Walker added.

Buju has already spent five days in federal custody in the United States and remains in jail pending his court appearance today at a pre-trial detention hearing.

This is when the US authorities will outline more details of the allegations against him and he will get a chance to apply for bail.

Already the authorities have claimed they have audio and video footage of Buju and others making arrangements to purchase several kilograms of cocaine.

However, Walker said that will not prevent him from asking the court to release Buju on bail.

"It is a detention hearing and a sort of status update where the government will bring in all the evidence it has," he said. "It was set for last Friday, but the government was not ready to proceed as they needed more time to get their evidence together."

He noted that under US law it is the defendant who has to prove that he should be granted bail because, with the serious nature of the charge, there is what is called "a presumption of detention".

"But the fact of the matter is the court still has to make an individual determination as to whether to grant bail.

"It is our position that he should be granted bail because he is innocent and is looking forward to establish that in a court of law."

Buju is slated to appear in the US District Court in the Southern District of Florida at 10 this morning.

Removal hearing

After today's hearing, the artiste will return to court on December 28 for a removal hearing, where the trial will be switched from the Middle District of Florida to the Southern District.

The affidavit, against Buju and his two alleged conspirators was initially filed in the Middle District.

In that affidavit, a special agent with the US Drug Enforcement Administration alleged that Buju and two others knowingly and wilfully conspired to possess with intent to distribute five kilograms or more of a mixture and substance containing a detectable amount of cocaine.

The co-accused were identified as Ian Thomas and James Mack, who were allegedly arrested in a sting operation when they attempted to buy cocaine.

A firearm was also reportedly taken from a vehicle driven by one of the men.

Buju, who was not on the scene at the time of the drug bust, was later arrested on charges of dealing in illegal drugs and could spend more than 20 years in a federal prison if he is found guilty.