

Jamaica prepares to rid penal code of slavery-era flogging law

Jamaica is preparing to abolish a slavery-era law allowing flogging and whipping as means of punishing prisoners, the Caribbean country's justice ministry said Thursday.

The ministry said the punishment hasn't been ordered by a court since 2004 but the statutes remain in the island's penal code. It was administered with strokes from a tamarind-tree switch or a cat o'nine tails, a whip made of nine, knotted cords. Justice Minister Mark Golding says the "degrading" punishment is an anachronism which violates Jamaica's international obligations and is preventing Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller's government from ratifying the U.N. convention against torture. "The time has come to regularize this situation by getting these colonial-era laws off our books once and for all," Golding said in a Thursday statement. The Cabinet has already approved repealing the flogging law and amendments to other laws in the former British colony, where plantation slavery was particularly brutal. The announcement was welcomed by human rights activists who view the flogging law as a barbaric throwback in a nation populated mostly by the descendants of slaves. "We don't really see that (the flogging law) has any part in the approach of dealing with crime in a modern democracy," said group spokeswoman Susan Goffe. But there are no shortage of crime-weary Jamaicans who feel that authorities should not drop the old statutes but instead enforce them, arguing that thieves who steal livestock or violent criminals who harm innocent people should receive a whipping to teach them a lesson. "The worst criminals need strong punishing or else they'll do crimes over and over," said Chris Drummond, a Kingston man with three school-age children. "Getting locked up is not always enough." The last to suffer the punishment in Jamaica was Errol Pryce, who was sentenced to four years in prison and six lashes in 1994 for stabbing his mother-in-law. Pryce was flogged the day before being released from prison in 1997 and later complained to the U.N. Human Rights Committee, which ruled in 2004 that the form of corporal punishment was cruel, inhuman and degrading and violated his rights. Jamaican courts then stopped ordering whipping or flogging.

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