

Sunrise over the Caribbean



It is time to translate sporting and cultural success into prosperity, says **Portia Simpson-Miller**, prime minister of Jamaica

A major deterrent to expanding the use of renewable energy is the prohibitive capital cost

Look at the world in 2014 from the vantage point of a leader of a small island nation which faces development challenges, but is blessed with possibilities and boasts an international name-recognition beyond its size. The challenges Jamaica will face in 2014 are neither unique nor isolated. They include an unsustainable level of government debt, the high cost of imported energy and unemployment.

As part of the wider Caribbean, the region has to contend with the impact of climate change, a heightened vulnerability to natural disasters, weak export competitiveness and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. More job opportunities have to be found, especially for the youth, to slow the rate of migration of some of our best talent.

Greater resilience and growth in 2014 and beyond will demand deeper regional integration among and between the communities of Caribbean and Latin American states as well as expanded global co-operation, trade and investment. The third international Conference on Small Island Developing States, to be held in September 2014 in Samoa, can build partnerships with other countries for action on sustainable development, and the visit to the region in 2013 by China's president, Xi Jinping, underscores the Caribbean's relevance for emerging economies.

Jamaica's response to the economic challenges has been twofold. First, we have taken steps to stabilise and expand traditional sectors such as agriculture and tourism. In the sugar industry, ownership has been privatised, triggering long-delayed investments. We are taking similar initiatives for coffee and cocoa. In tourism we have broadened the range of foreign direct investment, to reduce the potential fallout from a downturn in any one market. We have attracted several of the major Spanish hotel chains to Jamaica, increasing the number of arrivals from Europe.

Second, we intend to maximise the benefits of Jamaica's geographical location by attracting investments which will make the country the logistics centre of the Caribbean. We are investing in information technology and in port facilities. Implementation of a public-private partnership to expand and modernise the Port of Kingston—the world's seventh-largest natural harbour—is now under way.

A big obstacle in 2014 will be the cost of energy, given Jamaica's almost total reliance on

imported fuel. Blessed as we are with sun, wind and water, we are developing renewable energy, in particular solar. In this regard countries like Jamaica need bilateral and multilateral help. A major deterrent to expanding the use of renewable energy is the prohibitive capital cost.

With support from the IMF and other multilateral institutions we have embarked on a difficult economic-reform programme aimed at putting the country's fiscal house in order. It is important to note, however, that notwithstanding the necessary sacrifices associated with the programme, the IMF agreement maintains some protection for low-income households and the most vulnerable. Our objective is to ensure that the children of the poor benefit from increased access to education and health services.

Jamaica faces another hurdle in that, although heavily indebted and encumbered with high energy costs and unemployment, it is classified as a middle-income country and is thus unable to access concessionary financing. My administration is committed to working with countries in a similar situation to persuade multilateral institutions of our need for such support.

Sprinting towards success

As a cultural and sporting superpower and home to the world's fastest man and woman, Usain Bolt and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, we intend to exploit Jamaica's international brand and develop the potential of our cultural industries. Our achievements in sport and music did not come overnight or out of the blue. They represent a continuation of the groundbreaking efforts of athletes such as Arthur Wint, Herb McKenley, Donald Quarrie and Merlene Ottey. In the arts, reggae is a recognised music form globally and the late Bob Marley has achieved iconic status. As in sport, Marley's success was built on the creative genius of several artists, many of whom have never received due recognition. We aim to correct this with programmes for sports and cultural tourism.

The Jamaican people have always demonstrated a capacity to equal or surpass the achievements of their contemporaries internationally. The challenge is to imbue these qualities into all sectors of our economy and society. Like the glorious Jamaican sunshine rising over the deep blue of our mountains and pushing away the night sky with its rays of hope and promise, Jamaica faces 2014 with confidence. ■