

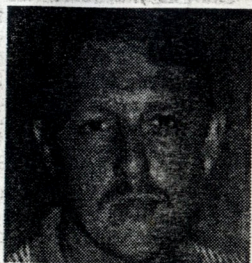
Society, security and UWI

By CHRISTOPHER STARR

THE CRISIS at UWI arising out of the violent death of student Shiva Latchman has generated a great deal of talk and emotion. I had hoped that from this would appear a broad, fundamental discussion of how the university should assure its own safety and peace of mind. Nothing of the sort seems to be in the making.

Two attitudes toward campus security are in the air: a) nothing can be done, and b) it is obvious what is to be done. It is hard to know which is more wrong-headed. The first, defeatist attitude could aggravate an already difficult enrollment and staff recruitment/retention situation. Blessedly, it shows no sign of growing. The second could leave us gravely unprepared, as what it takes for granted does not even merit serious consideration.

The students have in recent years twice shut down the campus around demands that the university do more (of the same) for security. The administration has consistently responded that the budget does not allow it to do more. The two sides are thus united in a single idea: The safety of



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persons and property is a matter of what the administration will/can do.

Addressing an assembly of students the day after Latchman's death, acting Principal Mootoo promised that, as a key measure, holes in the fence around the main campus would be patched. The core of the student response, so I am told, was, "Good, but we don't really believe you will do it."

This shared attitude is dangerously off target in two ways. First, it manifests a wish to divorce the university from the wider community, as if we were a resort or corporate village. It cannot be done. While maintaining the fence is a good idea, the perimeter cannot be effectively sealed against any determined intruder, and it should not be tried. The real world's problems unavoidably find their way into the university, and isolationism can only foster a relation-

ship of mutual hostility.

In an age of tight budgets, delayed payments from the governments and an increasing questioning of the university's value to society, it is reckless for academics to be indifferent to good public relations.

Following hard on the student protests, there has been a flurry of new security measures. I do not believe they are worth much. I see, for example, a great deal of checking of car stickers at the main entrance, checking identity cards at some (not all) walk-in entrances, especially when people come to work in the morning, and checking of ID cards upon entry into the Main Library. As if badjohns drive onto campus, or tend to walk in during main working hours, or read our books without permission. These measures have one thing in common: They place officers where many people will see them looking busy. Will they keep the badjohns away? Personally, I don't think these ruses would fool a drugged idiot.

And yet I perceive an eagerness to be persuaded that they amount to a solution. Laying on additional officers and checkpoints is a quick fix (we saw just how quick) with the usual

shortcomings. If it inhibits the search for a lasting solution, it will do much more harm than good.

Second, real security is not an administrative task. If I were a security consultant to the university, I hope that I would have the sense to take a fresh look at the problem and ask, "Where have people had this sort of problem and done it well?" Has any section of Laventille or Princes Town, for example, shown a creative, promising way to better public safety? And where I found such a community, I would ask how their lessons could be adapted to our situation.

Almost certainly, the heart of the answer lies in a stronger sense of solidarity. Security must become everybody's business. But before administration heads get to nodding too vigorously, let me note what I do NOT mean by this. I do not mean that everyone must hasten to carry plenty of identification and be very careful to lock windows and doors in order that the administration may do ITS job of protecting the rest of us. I do mean that everyone will have to

be more involved, a little more suspicious and *macocious*, and meaner.

I am arguing for a very different view of campus (or community) security. It can be summarised in two statements: 1. There will be no real security until people care what happens to each other. 2. The administration's security apparatus must be an adjunct of the community's own efforts, not the other way around. I expect that Chief of Security Steve Farrell is in substantial agreement with this view. And I expect that within the administration he is in a distinct minority. That may be the main obstacle.

Besides the students and administration, there are two other players in the recent on-campus drama. Through their union, the support staff have come out in solidarity with the students. The academic staff seem to be in militant abstention. To speak of any of these four groups as a single-minded unit is of course a journalistic expedient. Still, one must note that there are deep divides of misunderstanding and mistrust among the players, with no seri-

ous mechanisms now in place to overcome them. Security must be based on creative, collective action around common interests. It can be done, but so far we have not even made a beginning.

Finally, an observation for those who have been hostile to student mass-activism: You may wish to reconsider. In the next period the students will be a stronger adversary than before. They are getting better at it. Toward the end of this last upsurge, I saw a definite sense of formation growing in the marches. And they are learning the uses of picong — as those of us who sat through last week's Ssshh Campaign in the library can attest. Picong can be a powerful political instrument, and in any major confrontation it will belong to the students.

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