



Letter from Old Providence

from Our Own Correspondent

EYE WORLD

THE last Briton to rule our tiny, palm-fringed island in the western Caribbean was chased out by the Spanish in 1806. Captain John Bligh said he'd be back with reinforcements. But he never came, ushering in two centuries mostly of forgotten indifference from far away Colombia, under whose flag our 5,000 English-speaking Baptists have lived ever since.

To give the mainlanders their due, they've been paying more attention to *Providencia* (as they call us) in recent years. When Hurricane Iota flattened the island in November, destroying 80 percent of our homes, president Iván Duque flew in the very next day. He promised to have everything rebuilt by 2022. Seven months on, things don't look good: only two new houses have gone up. Quite a few roofs were repaired, but none has the moorings needed to help survive the next hurricane.

While Duque deals with a national strike that has gripped the rest of Colombia for weeks, most of us are still in tents. Now the rainy season is here, our not-so-temporary homes are rotting. Another tropical storm will blow them and us away, for the government hasn't built any evacuation shelters either.

So, not a good time to get coronavirus. But our mayor, Norberto Gari Hooker, has allegedly been using the pandemic to do favours for friends. Since December, he has been under house arrest as investigations limp on into claims that he was bumping up the cost of fumigating public buildings to control the spread of Covid and then handing out public works contracts at inflated prices in return for votes. The attorney-general is asking Hooker to account for some 7,000 contracts which the

government says he agreed in 2019-20.

Providencia still remains popular with some Colombians. Lockdown was a gift for drug traffickers as it cleared airports and beaches of nosy parkers. On 23 May, 446kg of cocaine, worth more than \$20m, was found aboard one light aircraft at the island's airstrip. It had flown in from Guaymaral, a private airport in Bogotá, and was meant to be carrying medical supplies for hurricane victims. Most likely its cargo would then have been ferried by "fast boat" to nearby Honduras, to be smuggled to the US.

The heist was remarkable for its size – and for being discovered at all, for smuggling is part of our history. Old Providence was founded in 1629 by a rather less well-known group of Puritans seeking salvation in the New World. Unlike the Founding Fathers, their rivals and contemporaries to the north, refugees aboard the *Seaflower* struggled to set up a colony in our coral-ringed paradise and were soon displaced by pirates. Legend has it Captain Henry Morgan's treasure is buried in Old Providence. Today's pirates, from the mainland, are just as resourceful and usually have more reliable connections.

Guaymaral is stuffed with anti-narcotics police, and only the best-connected traffickers have the cash to buy off meddling officials. Their friends in the Colombian navy warn them when surveillance planes are in the area, and their people in *la Fiscalia* (the public prosecutor's office) ensure that even if they are nabbed, they're invariably released without charge.

Just as traffickers need politicians to make their lives easier, politicians need traffickers: campaigning even on a tiny island can be expensive, and organised crime has the deepest pockets. Everyone in Old Providence knows that "vote-buying" is not exactly uncommon. Allegations sometimes surface in the mainland linking a prospective candidate to a cartel. It's much less often that they are investigated seriously or produce charges.

With cocaine trafficking and "politricks" like this, who'd be a farmer or a fisherman?

Whispers from China

BEIJING has finally explained why Uyghur exiles have been unable to contact their loved ones back in the homeland for the past four years. It blames "vicious rumours", spread by Xinjiang people in other countries who are "poisoned by the three forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism"; offences of "murder, rape and robbery", committed by the said relatives; or the fact that many of them may simply have lost their phones.

This reassurance from Chinese state mouthpiece the *Global Times* was presumably in response to the testimony that emerged last month at the Uyghur Tribunal in London, which is examining "ongoing atrocities and possible genocide" against the Uyghur and other Muslim populations in China.

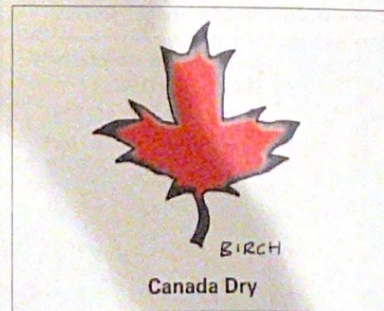
According to *Global Times*, it was orchestrated by CIA agent, er, Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, who oversaw four gruelling days of purported first-hand witness accounts from Xinjiang's voluntary re-education camps – all "shameless slander" and a concoction of lies against the good name of the People's Republic of China, said the paper.

The Chinese government has done its bit to parade some of the more prominent detainees on camera over the past few months to reassure those far away. Proof-of-life videos, as they are called, usually involve the miscreant stuttering praise for the Chinese Communist Party, while telling viewers their rapid weight loss has nothing to do with a diet of gruel. After the

tribunal (which will sit again in September), 14 such relatives were found and galvanised into vilifying their kin abroad in no uncertain terms.

While Beijing justifies its actions by invoking the War on Terror, it refuses to address the elephant in the room: the disappearance of hundreds of academics, writers, poets and singers wrenched from their homes at dead of night by machine gun-toting soldiers. Deaths in custody of pensioners, second-hand rumours of lengthy extra-judicial prison sentences and worrying news of on-site crematoria have done nothing to put the minds of those in the diaspora at rest.

Meanwhile, the peace-loving seekers of a good life overseas have turned overnight into banner waving, anti-China slogan chanting activists, desperate for real news of their families back home.



Postcard from Bamako

HIGH on the *Colline de Pouvoir* (Power Hill), where the presidential palace Koulouba is located, the air is a lot more pleasant than in the urban cauldron below, where four million people eke out a living in the hot, polluted air of Bamako, Mali's sprawling but overcrowded capital (pictured).

Kati, just a short drive from Koulouba and further up the hills, has even fresher air, and it is here our soldiers have their main base. Since we got our independence from France in 1960, they have come down the road five times, to claim the presidency for themselves. In 1968, they



removed a Soviet-style autocrat from Power Hill. In 1991, they removed a military dictator, Moussa Traoré, in the wake of a popular uprising against him, which he bloodily repressed. The man himself died peacefully last September.

Outsiders looking at our impoverished West African country said we now had "democracy" and gave our leaders eye-watering sums of money, most of which disappeared in the increasingly corrupt circles of the new political elites. The rot went unnoticed until the immense north of our country was overrun, first by Tuareg rebels and then by armed fanatics and criminals calling themselves jihadists. Our once proud army, demoralised and ill-equipped, was no match for these foreign-funded gangs.

Enraged, our soldiers took that road to Koulouba again, in 2012. But the world had changed. Coups were no longer acceptable and so, after a year of turbulence and violence, the soldiers relented and we had another election. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, a suave founding member of our democratic political class and lover of luxury, became the new occupant of Power Hill.

But the armed gangs swarmed over ever larger parts of our country and the soldiers became ever more disgruntled. In August 2020, amid mass demonstrations and riots, down the road they came again from Kati and arrested the president. They did not catch his son Karim, easily the most hated figure in the country, who fled to Ivory Coast, where he continues his champagne lifestyle.

Colonel Assimi Goïta is our man now. Young, well trained and articulate, he sports an immaculate designer beard. He and his friends, five colonels in all, are now in charge. They allowed an interim president and prime minister to organise a transitional government, while "the international community", which has thousands of troops in Mali to go where our brave boys have failed to take on the extremists, looked on and wrung its hands. When the new interim leaders tried to fire two of the colonels' friends last month, the army made that short trip down the hills again and put Goïta firmly in control.

Most of us down here in the cauldron think: fine. Let them get on with it. We want our house in order. But when we heard the name of the new prime minister, we scratched our heads. Choguel Kokalla Maïga, 63, is a consummate turncoat, a former buddy of the dictator Moussa Traoré, and an unlikely choice to go beyond looking after his own.

France has already announced it is pulling out its troops. It's the old order and the smuggling gangs that direct the hopeless and desperate north who are celebrating.