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JAMAICA IN RACE TO MEET APRIL 16 CCJ INAUGURATION

by Kathy Barrett

KINGSTON, Jamaica, CMC - The Jamaica government is racing against time in its bid to meet the April 16 inauguration of the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) in the wake of parliamentary wrangling over the required legislation.

Principal of the Norman Manley Law School, Keith Sobion, says it will be a close call for the PJ Patterson administration to complete the necessary parliamentary procedures before next weekend.

"The government may be very well hard pressed to meet the April 16 inauguration of the court," said Sobion, a former Attorney General in Trinidad and Tobago.

He said much would depend "on the part that the opposition plays in seeking to secure what will only be in the best interest of Jamaica and the region in having a united position in so far as trade matters, hemispherically and globally is concerned".

His comments follow Tuesday's sitting of the House of Representatives where there was yet another setback in the debate on the legislation establishing the CCJ, which will replace the London-based Privy Council and which Caribbean governments say will strengthen their independence.

During the parliamentary session, the main opposition Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) which has publicly called for a referendum on the issue, demanded the re-appointment of the Joint Select Committee to approve a final report.

Throughout the sitting, the Opposition members chided the Government for breaching parliamentary practices in its "mad rush" to push through the CCJ Bill.

Opposition's spokesman on Justice, Delroy Chuck said that a draft report was circulated last week and was tabled in the House last Thursday, but only five members of the 16-member committee signed it.

Chuck said that he could not participate in an improper procedure of Parliament and asked to be excused from the Chamber.

The disagreement saw Opposition legislators refusing to take part in the discussion and some of them walked out of Parliament forcing the intervention of Prime Minister PJ Patterson.

After Patterson brought the situation under control, a meeting involving leaders of both sides was hastily convened.

"We have an undertaking from the Leader of Opposition that all good offices will be used to enable the House to debate the report and take it through all its stages on Tuesday the 12th," said Dr. Peter Phillips, the leader of Government Business.

Following the debate of the report in the House of Representatives on Tuesday, it will be debated in the Senate on April 15, one day before the CCJ is inaugurated in Trinidad and Tobago.

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