



**Rastafari Mansions & Organizations (RMO)
Official Statement & Call for Rastafari Rights & Justice Act**

Kingston, Jamaica. April 21, 2026

Rastafari faith-based indigenous culture of Jamaica, has made a profound global impact since its emergence in the 1930's evolving into a global symbol of Jamaica, African consciousness, as well as a moral standard of righteousness and wholesome living.

The formally constituted Rastafari Mansions and Organizations (RMO), representing the widest consortium of Rastafari organizations in Jamaica (see overview in footer), commends the government of St. Kitts and Nevis for its stand-alone 2023 Rastafari Rights Recognition Act and its March 2026 parliamentary affirmation of the Act, which formally recognizes Rastafari identity, sacramental rights, and provides substantive reparatory entitlements. This includes waivers on ganja license fees, business license fees, property tax, as well as concessions on the purchase and lease of crown lands, income tax, and customs import duties.

The RMO also acknowledges Antigua and Barbuda for its 2023 Sacramental authorizations under the 2018 Cannabis Act, which provides legal protection of Rastafari from arrest, detention or prosecution. It also makes reparatory provisions for Rastafari Sacramental rights, including preferential considerations in licensing to offset harms resulting from criminalization and marginalization.

RMO refutes Minister Grange's (Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sports) recent statement in the media that Rastafari recognition, and rights, have already been provided for in the Government of Jamaica's (GOJ) constitutional and legislative framework—an assertion which came in response to St. Kitts' recent declaration of legislative advances in their country. The claim of Jamaica's regional leadership in legislative protection of Rastafari rights is false.

True recognition and protection requires specific definition and entrenchment within the Jamaican constitution, along with provisions that will ensure a multi-dimensional legal status which can be filtered into various branches of government, with enforceable accountability. This has not yet happened.

While the RMO acknowledges GOJ has advanced several initiatives addressing the concerns of the Rastafari community, it has failed to officially enact a comprehensive rights and reparatory justice framework. The pervasive colonial mindset of state agents across Ministries and political administrations, perpetuates the same discriminatory values and attitudes which fueled multiple historic atrocities against the Rastafari community. The following provides a few illustrative cases:

State Discrimination, Violations and Abuse of Authority

- **Pinnacle:** Sanctioned by the GOJ in 1954 on the first self-sustaining Rastafari settlement, police raided and decimated hundreds of homes, burned 50+ acres of ganja and food, mass beatings of approximately 140 people.
- **Back-o-Wall:** Sanctioned by the GOJ in 1966 a communal, religious and ceremonial Nyahbinghi site was bulldozed and replaced with the Tivoli Gardens housing complex. Families displaced, dreadlocks of Rastafari community members brutally trimmed, physical abuse, wrongful arrests/imprisonment with no re-settlement support offered.
- **Coral Gardens Bad Friday:** The 1963 state-ordered attack on the Rastafari community. Several killed, mass arrests, wrongful charges and imprisonment, merciless torture, and forced trimming of dreadlocks of over 150 community members.

There are also a multiplicity of more recent individual cases involving abuse of authority with the following being just two :

- **Gebre Medhin:** In 2020, four constables severely beat and choked Medhin for allegedly resisting arrest after driving a vehicle with an expired license.
- **Nzinga King:** The 2021 police brutality of 17-year old Rastafari empress pepper-sprayed for not wearing a covid mask, jailed and sentenced without trial, dreadlocks forcibly cut.

Violation of Sacramental Rights

Rastafari has suffered historic abuse and imprisonment over sacramental use of ganja from the 1960's era which instituted a draconian mandatory 18-month imprisonment for possessing even 1 ganja seed. Despite the 2015 Dangerous Drugs (Amendment) Act (DDAA), which has decriminalized Rastafari's sacramental ganja rights, thousands of cases have been brought to the courts since the passing of the law.

The blatant violation of Rastafari sacramental rights remains standard in practice, wherein members are arrested, charged, and endure prolonged legal exposure before rights are discretionarily upheld. Judicial correction occurs after harm has already been inflicted, including uncompensated loss of property, loss of income during incarceration, economic hardship and reputational damage. The absence of police training to distinguish lawful sacramental use from criminal activity as well as lack of clear enforcement and accountability mechanisms for breaches of rights result in numerous cases such as the following to continue occurring until today:

- **Geddes (Zoser) Laird (Ocho Rios Police Station, St Ann):** , Laird was arrested while transporting 11 pounds of ganja from a cultivation site to a registered BoboAshanti church. Even after referencing Rastafari sacramental rights to police officers there was illegal search of his home and seizure of 22 pounds of leaves prepared for healing and skin care products. While in police custody, Laird was handcuffed for 12 hours and given a bottle to urinate in publicly. No actual charges were filed, and his 22 pounds of leaves were not returned to him.
- **Negril 2025:** 76 pounds of ganja were seized in a large-scale operation. The Cultivator asserted sacramental use consistent with Rastafari practice. However, he was arrested and charged for possession and dealing. Attorney, member and legal advisor to the RMO, represented the case resulting in charges being finally dismissed and the ganja ordered returned.
- **Zion Yard, St Elizabeth 2025:** 295 pounds of ganja were seized at a Rastafari community site with established legal sacramental rights. Charges were filed for possession, dealing and cultivation. Case was dismissed due to absence of evidence. Court ordered the return of the ganja, but 124 pounds could not be accounted for.
- **St Thomas, 2021-2026:** Over 900 cannabis plants were destroyed at a registered sacramental cultivation site. Asides from the destruction of crops, there was the initiation of criminal charges. The case collapsed after prolonged proceedings.

As an overarching issue related to the RMO call for an omnibus Act, The DDAA mischaracterizes Rastafari sacrament under criminal law, denying Rastafari full cultural and constitutional rights protection. But there are other systemic issues. Upon the inclusion of Rastafari Sacramental rights in the DDAA, the Ministry of Justice had established a Rastafari Advisory Committee under the Cannabis Licensing Authority (CLA), which assisted in the registration of Rastafari Sacramental sites. However this became dormant within two years with no structured mechanism currently existing for State-Community dialogue, nor settlement for ongoing injustices. Additionally, the Police Commissioner has not issued a 'force order' to hold police accountable for the enforcement of Sacramental rights under the DDAA. Finally, there is no reparative element in the DDAA law, which provides economic inclusion for Rastafari in a now booming industry built on the brutal generational suffering of the community.

Discrimination in Education

For decades, Rastafari children have been ostracized by administrators of public schools. In 2020 a Supreme Court ruling reinforced that a certain Primary school did not breach rights of a student being barred from school for having dreadlocks. After years of agitation, the ruling was subsequently overturned, and Jamaica's education ministry pledged to legally outlaw such discrimination. To date, Jamaica's Education Act does not enshrine protections for Rastafari children. A 2023 student grooming policy provides no accountability for protection of the Rastafari covenant and relates to only one issue, while a multitude of other discriminatory

practices exist including lack of appropriate dietary options in schools; denial of requests for exemption from Religious ceremonies; penalization for school absence on Rastafari holy days and persistent peer harassment, as well as absence of Rastafari history, and relevant African history in the national curriculum.

Health and Medical Discrimination

During the June 2024 Sectoral Debate in the House of Representatives, Minister Grange recounted an incident involving three Rastafari students barred from taking their end-of-year exams because their parents declined vaccinations on religious grounds. After an appeal by the RMO, intervention by the Ministry of Culture enabled these students to take their exams, however, this practice by school administrations is widespread and currently depends on individual intervention, which underscores the need for formal legal protections and Rastafari rights.

Irie Lyons: In 2016, a Rastafari elder was admitted to a health facility for medical care. During his stay, in his vulnerable state, his beard was cut off without his consent, in the absence of and without approval of the family. The human rights violation caused significant emotional distress, which the family states led to his transition.

Employment Discrimination

While dreadlocks have become more acceptable in public and private workplaces, discrimination of Rastafari in employment occurs, including unequal access to hiring and promotion, and workplace practices that limit participation and advancement. A recent case was brought to the attention of the RMO:

Byron Morris: In June 2025, newly hired Jamaica Tourist Board Operators/JUTA tour bus driver side-lined after his first tour assignment. The tour destination hotel's policy prohibited workers from having a beard. His request to review the policy in the hotel's handbook was ignored, and no further tour assignments received.

Cultural & Economic Exploitation

Rastafari identity (encompassing music, symbols, language, colours, and even gestures) has been aggressively commodified, without consent, protection, or benefit-sharing. The appropriation is especially stark in tourism, Jamaica's leading foreign exchange generator, where Rastafari culture remains central but receives little or no benefits. Despite a "Practice Notice" developed within the Jamaica Intellectual Property Office (JIPO), there remains no legal framework for its enforceability. As a result, Rastafari culture remains commercially exploited without representation, regulation or compensation, including at the level of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

Economic Exclusion & Reparations and Relief Gaps

There is no comprehensive reparative justice framework addressing Rastafari's historic dispossession, displacement, and oppression, nor formal recognition of Rastafari as a distinct group entitled to reparations.

After decades of persecution for its relationship with ganja, Rastafari remains largely excluded from the legal cannabis industry. There is no structured access to licensing, tax relief, or economic redress, while a market of over 70 licensed dispensaries—largely financed by wealthy and foreign investors—now dominates an industry historically pioneered and advocated by Rastafari. This represents a deep social and economic debt.

Following Hurricane Melissa, there has been no targeted Government assessment or support for the Rastafari community or the RMO-led Relief, Rebuild and Rise (RRR) initiative. Mainstream relief efforts are not reaching and do not benefit the community as they fail to align with Rastafari dietary, cultural and health practices. RMO's initial mapping of 103 households shows 22% elderly (65–79 years) now homeless, with 37% reporting illness or injury. While the plots of land provided for the purpose of the Coral Gardens Elder Care Facility are acknowledged, the site remains uninhabitable while urgent shelter needs persist. Beyond this, several Rastafari Centres that serve as community-based hubs in the areas hit hardest by the hurricane have been badly damaged. The need for land tenure is now greater than ever before, as the community seeks to rebuild and needs land ownership to preserve the physical legacy of Rastafari lividity. Within its programme of post-Melissa land reform, the RMO calls on GOJ to honour its payment of outstanding reparatory debt.

The GOJ's statement claims that Jamaica's Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (2011) guarantees freedom of religion for all faiths. However, there is no specific mention of Rastafari in the constitution as a

recognized faith and an absence of the required broader legal recognition of Rastafari as an indigenous culture and faith-based group with unserved reparatory justice.

The Coral Gardens apology addresses one atrocity, while there are multiple others including Pinnacle Back-O-Wall and ganja-related aggressions, impacting thousands of Rastafari across Jamaica. The Coral Gardens Trust Fund, with small grants to survivors; operating stipend for an elder care facility and transfer of 2 acres of land 8 years after the apology, inadequately compensates a handful of survivors while there has been no attempt to address redress and recovery for the persecution inflicted on the wider community. From the multi-site decimation and displacement of Rastafari communities in historic atrocities, to the ongoing police abuse, educational and workplace discrimination, and infringements on sacramental rights, this cumulatively has incurred a vast social debt in relation to the Rastafari community.

None of the government's legal provisions, separately or together, creates a national system that protects Rastafari from pervasive discrimination across policing, prisons, schools, employment, land access, health care, housing, culture, and economic life. These are not isolated incidents but reflect systemic and enduring oppression.

The RMO's call for a comprehensive **Rastafari Rights and Justice Act** therefore is a logical response to the current piecemeal provisions that leave rights uncertain, discretionary, and weakly enforced. This is indefensible in a country that continues to aggressively commodify Rastafari in ways previously mentioned.

In an attempt to address these multi-layered issues, on December 3, 2024 RMO formally requested a meeting with the Minister of Culture to discuss a proposed inter-ministerial process in support of developing a Rastafari Act. To date, there has been no acknowledgement of, or response to the request. Again on February 8, 2025, the RMO, in response to a government Public Notice calling for submissions for constitutional amendments made a formal submission justifying the need for official Recognition of the Rastafari Community and calling for this to be anchored in the Constitution. To date, there has been no acknowledgement of or response to this submission.

Therefore, the RMO renews its call for the collaborative development of a comprehensive Rastafari Act to ensure legal recognition, protection, and advancement of the community.

The 60th anniversary of His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I's state visit to Jamaica, which on April 21st 1966 represented a turning point in the informal recognition and greater acceptance of the Rastafari community within Jamaica, now provides a milestone opportunity for commitment and practical steps towards formal recognition and repair of the trust and mutual respect of the Rastafari community with the government.

The RMO calls on the Government of Jamaica to legitimize its claim of leadership commitment to justice for Rastafari by collaborating with the community to establish formal recognition and develop the first comprehensive Rastafari Act to finally secure broad-based rights and justice for the world's original Rastafari community.

(for petition in support of the Rastafari Rights & Justice Act, see link under Advocacy Works on RMO website <https://www.rmojamaica.com>)

Rastafari Mansions and Organizations (RMO) is an umbrella entity in Jamaica, operating under a formal constitution signed by 14 founding organizations in 2022, with the aim of uniting and representing legitimate Rastafari mansions and organizations to advance shared interests; mobilize collective resources towards economic empowerment; support partnerships and progress toward repatriation and uphold the Rastafari creed, "let the hungry be fed, naked clothed, sick nourished, ignorant educated, aged protected, and infants cared for".

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