

Government gives green light to casinos

Casino Gambling could soon become legal in Jamaica. The Government has given approval for a group of international investors to establish the island's first legal casino.

Prime Minister Bruce Golding is expected to announce the decision and provide details during his presentation in the Budget Debate on Tuesday.

Government sources say the first casino is to be established at a new hotel to be constructed in Montego Bay, St James. According to the sources, the new hotel will have more rooms than any now operating in the island, and will employ thousands of Jamaicans.

Multibillion-US-dollar development

„It will be more than 3,000, and could have as many as 4,000 rooms. However, the multibillion-US-dollar development will not take place if there is no casino attached,“ the sources explained. The sources refused to name the developers, only saying that it was an international group with a good track record of operating hotels and casinos.

„This will be a major part of the Government's drive to create jobs and more jobs and spur economic growth,“ the Government sources added.

Efforts to get an official comment from the administration were unsuccessful as The Sunday Gleaner was encouraged to await the prime minister's presentation in the Budget Debate. Speaking from China, Tourism Minister Edmund Bartlett refused to comment on the reports, also pointing to the prime minister's pending address.

Bartlett has made no secret of his support for the introduction of casinos and, in January, described as hypocritical, the campaign against casino gambling. He argued that the interest groups, which have been lobbying against the official introduction of casino gambling, are silent on other forms of betting, gaming and lotteries. According to Bartlett, the Jamaica Labour Party government will not renege on commitments made by the previous People's National Party (PNP) administration to give the country's first casino licence to an undisclosed group of foreign investors.

Ongoing controversy

Jamaica has legalised slot and other gaming machines throughout the country, with gaming lounges being opened in several places. But the ongoing controversy over casinos prevented the previous administration from going the full way.

However, the PNP made it clear it was leaning in that direction after a 2003 study, commissioned by the party, recommended adopting casino gambling as a way of enhancing the tourism product. In 2006, it appeared that the PNP government had committed to the concept of a casino resort, complete with sports book, table games and slot machines.

This was to have a rider that the legal limit of 1,000 machines per location would be surpassed if the hotel had more than 1,000 rooms.