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American teenage boys from Tranquility Bay still missing

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WESTERN BUREAU:

OFFICIALS AT Tranquility Bay and the St. Elizabeth police intensified their efforts yesterday to ferret out two American male teenagers who have been on the lam from the Tranquility Bay facility in St. Elizabeth since last weekend.

The team has been scouring several neighbourhoods in the parish for the two teenagers but has met with no success. When The Gleaner contacted the facility yesterday, Jay Kay, the chief director at the facility, was said to be out spearheading the effort to find the missing boys and was not available to comment.

However, a source at the facility, which was opened in 1997, said the boys have not yet been located. The source added that while the police have been alerted, she was not able to say whether the parents of the missing teens have been informed of the situation.

"All I can say is that the boys are still missing and that we are looking for them," the source said. "I would assume that the parents have been informed but I can't say that has happened for sure."

REPORTS OF BRUTALITY

Since the self-styled behaviour modification centre commenced its Jamaican operations eight years ago, the facility has been dogged by occasional reports of brutality against the children. The facility is being operated by the United States-based World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools, and parents are required to pay as much as US$3,900 per month to have the facility correct the anti-social tendencies of their offspring.

Reports of possible child abuse at Tranquility Bay first surfaced when on August 10, 2001, Valerie Herron, an American teenager, reportedly jumped to her death from the roof of the girl's facility after she reportedly became fed-up with the strict boot camp-like restrictions at the facility.

Just last week, a report surfaced on the Internet in which a Florida woman said her 17-year-old nephew, who had been placed at Tranquillity Bay for behaviour modification by his parents, emerged badly traumatised at the end of his stint there. The Gleaner was unable to confirm the authenticity of the report, but it mirrors a lot of the general concerns that hound the institution.

Allison Anderson, head of the Child Development Agency, believes that unless concerned parents are willing to come forward and provide concrete examples of abuse, there is little that any regulatory agency can do.

"We've heard rumours on the news and the Internet about alleged abuse, but Tranquility Bay is a private educational institution, the Education Ministry has responsibility for it, and they have gone and

done visits, and the facility is still in operation ...," she said

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Return to Tranquility Bay Page