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Trinidad and Tobago: police killings go unpunished

In a report published today, Amnesty International argues that structural reforms within the police forces -- including the implementation of a human rights- based Code of Conduct, a transparent chain of command and criminal prosecutions in cases of human rights abuses -- are key to regaining community support, essential for preventing and combating crime.

Amnesty International's report looks at the issue of police killings and deaths in custody through cases reported since 2003. The report highlights the authorities' failure to conduct investigations and to bring those responsible to justice.

The crime rate in Trinidad and Tobago is one of the highest in the Caribbean. Murders and kidnappings have been on the rise for the past few years. As a response to increasing crime, there have been calls for tougher police measures.

Between 2003 and 2005, 35 people died after being shot by the police or while in police custody. In March 2006, Constable Dave Burnett became the first and only police officer convicted of murdering a civilian while on duty. The lack of information available regarding investigations into any of the other reported cases shows the lack of the authorities' commitment in bringing those responsible to account.

"A Code of Conduct, which includes what actions or omissions are considered abuses, and which holds individual officers accountable would not only prevent abuses from happening in the future but might have prevented the killing of 35 people in the islands since 2003," said Kerrie Howard, Amnesty International Americas Programme Deputy Director.

On 13 October 2004, 17-year-old Sherman Monsegue was shot and killed by a police officer. Sherman was in the street with a friend when police arrived and opened fire while the two ran off. Sherman died in hospital. According to the police, Sherman opened fire first. This was denied by a number of witnesses.

A police investigation was opened almost a year after Sherman's death. Police officers called as witnesses have so far failed to appear. According to reports, the police officers are still on active duty in the area. Attorneys representing the family have not been given access to all relevant documentation, including witness statements. The inquest was due to resume yesterday.

In April 2004, 41-year-old Galene Bonadie, was killed by a police officer in Morvant, a village in

North-West Trinidad. Galene Bonadie was shot at close range with a rifle after she intervened to stop the police beating a man. The inquest into her death has been subject to delays and has been adjourned since the beginning of 2005.

"Galene's case perfectly illustrates how Trinidad and Tobago's police forces respond to a rise in crime: using lethal force without measuring the terrible consequences it has on dozens of people and their families."

"Coroners inquests must be made mandatory in all investigations of police shootings and deaths in custody. Inquests should also be timely and effective if there is to be any justice for the victim's relatives," said Kerrie Howard.

Recent measures to tackle street crime and improve police performance have done little to improve the situation.

The Police Complaints Authority (PCA), a civilian oversight body set up in 1993 to monitor the investigation of complaints by the Police Complaints Division, received 12,919 complaints between 1999 and 2004. Complaints include battery, harassment and criminal damage. Only 20% of cases were investigated.

Amnesty International hopes that the recently passed Police Complaints Authority Act will enhance its ability to conduct independent investigations and that its recommendations will be made binding.

"Policing is frequently a difficult and dangerous task requiring expert training and skills. A human rights approach should be at the heart of any reform process, as it represents the best means of ensuring that police practices recognize the human dignity and the rights of every person in Trinidad and Tobago, while providing them with effective protection from crime."

Background information

In January 2006, Amnesty International wrote to the authorities in Trinidad and Tobago setting out its concerns about allegations of human rights violations involving police officers and requesting information about some of the cases included in the report. No response has been received so far.

For a copy of the report: "Trinidad and Tobago: End police immunity for unlawful killings and deaths in custody", please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR490012006>

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