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Belize: Death penalty, treatment of refugees and justice for victims test commitment to human rights

"Belize's possible expansion of the use of the death penalty, its denial of meaningful review to potential applicants for asylum and its inconsistent access to justice for victims of alleged violations put its human rights reputation in the region at risk," Amnesty International said today, following the organization's first ever full research mission to the country.

The organization's delegates met with numerous representatives of the government, as well as members of the judiciary, the Ombudsman's office, prison personnel, the military and police in various locations around the country. In addition, the delegates exchanged views with various representatives of civil society, as well as the international community in Belize.

"Amnesty International appreciates the openness and willingness to engage in dialogue shown to its delegates, and hopes that such frank communication will continue in future," the organization said.

Amnesty International delegates were able to engage in dialogue about human rights standards and the level to which they are respected in Belize with a wide range of people. They gathered information on a large number of human rights concerns, including indigenous rights, land rights, the rights of women and children, administration of justice and the right to form trade unions and to bargain collectively.

Amnesty International noted with concern that, with regard to its commitments under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, Belize fails to offer a meaningful mechanism whereby individuals fleeing persecution in their own country can apply for political asylum; however, Amnesty International received assurances from the authorities that this breach will be addressed promptly.

While Amnesty International recognises that violations by police, military or prison guards appear to be sporadic, it is concerned at the apparent lack of systematic investigation and judicial follow-up of all such allegations.

Amnesty International was assured that in Belize, human rights violations by security forces and other state actors will not be tolerated, and that when such violations are reported they will be investigated promptly.

"We welcome the commitment made by the authorities that, in cases of well-founded reports of violations, those responsible will be brought to justice, in an open and timely manner," Amnesty International said stressing that it will be following all of these matters closely.

The international human rights organization visited Hattieville Prison and the Youth Hostel for young offenders. It noted the current efforts to improve conditions of detention in the newly privatised Hattieville Prison and appreciated the commitment expressed by the private Kolbe Foundation to respecting international norms for the treatment of detainees.

The Belizean authorities reiterated that the government retains ultimate responsibility for the treatment of detainees, and Amnesty International urged both the government and the Kolbe Foundation to ensure that all allegations of human rights violations be promptly investigated by the criminal justice system and those responsible for any violations brought to justice. Moreover the organisation urged prison authorities to allow regular monitoring by independent civil society representatives in the interest of openness and transparency.

Amnesty International noted with concern Belizeans' reports of violent crime and its effect on their country. At the same time, delegates explained that Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases and countries, as a violation of the fundamental right to life. Amnesty International believes that capital punishment has not been shown to have more of a deterrent effect than other measures; that it has a brutalising effect on all citizens by increasing the level of 'acceptable' violence within society as a whole; and that in many countries it has been shown to be applied in an unequal and openly discriminatory manner.

With regard to the specifics of the proposed amendment to the Belizean Constitution to eliminate appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council for mandatory death sentences pending establishment of a Caribbean Court of Justice, delegates expressed Amnesty International's concern that it will open the door to more executions.

"Such an amendment would harm all Belizeans by eroding the principle of equal protection before the law and equal access to justice for all," Amnesty International stressed.

The organization appreciates the recent opportunity to visit Belize to learn more about its citizens' human rights concerns, and looks forward to engaging with them in future on the issues raised. Amnesty International will issue a full report on the mission in early 2003.

Public Document

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