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Jamaica: Amnesty welcomes government projects but warns of vital need for real change

Amnesty International today welcomed initiatives by the Jamaican Government to tackle the country's public security crisis but warned that success will only be measured in terms of lives saved and people lifted out of poverty.

The organization's assessment is part of a 32-page report that evaluates the Jamaican Government's plans to tackle deep rooted violence, serious human rights violations and impunity.

Jamaica has extremely high rates of violent crime. According to police statistics, in 2008 alone there were 1,611 murders in Jamaica – in a population of only 2.7 million. Most of the victims live in socially-excluded inner-city areas. In 2008 the proportion of child victims grew significantly.

During 2008, an additional 224 people were fatally shot by police officers. It is estimated that in the first five months of 2009 alone, police killings increased by 58%, however, police officers are rarely punished for these crimes. There have been no convictions against a police officer since 2006 and only 4 convictions between 1999 and 2009 out of a total of more than 1,700 reports of fatal shootings.

“The outlook for Jamaica is still grim with alarming rates of killings and almost no convictions of state agents accused of serious human rights violations,” said Kerrie Howard, Americas Deputy Director at Amnesty International. “What is different now is that we finally see initiatives that might lead to real change.”

“Jamaicans cannot afford to wait any longer,” said Kerrie Howard. “Initiatives have to be implemented and produce concrete results soon. The lives of thousands depend on that.”

Amongst the government's proposals are projects to reform the Jamaican Constabulary Force, the modernization of the justice system and the elaboration of a community safety and security policy to tackle some of the issues behind the high levels of violence in the country. Bilateral and multilateral donors have committed to supporting many of the recommendations included in these plans.

Amnesty International's report reviews the proposal to reform the Jamaican Constabulary Force. In 2008 a strategic review of the force resulted in 124 recommendations that were accepted by the government. Some of the key objectives include the improvement of the forces' professionalism, responsiveness and accountability.

The organization also praised the authorities' project Justice System Reform to undertake a comprehensive review of the justice system and develop strategies and mechanisms for its modernization. In June 2007, the

Justice System Reform Task Force issued a detailed set of recommendations which, if implemented, could significantly improve access to justice for victims of criminal violence and police abuses.

“The government has embarked on a process of reform that if correctly and fully implemented could remove many of the factors contributing to the public security crisis and drastically improve respect for human rights in Jamaica,” said Kerrie Howard.

Background Information

In April 2008, Amnesty International published a report on the long-standing situation of poverty, exclusion and violence which led to a public security crisis in Jamaica’s inner-cities. The document showed how, caught between the criminal gangs who control their neighbourhoods and violent policing methods, people living in these communities are at constant risk of violence with little or no effective state protection.

Read the full report here: ['Jamaica: Public security reforms and human rights in Jamaica'](#)