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English-speaking Caribbean: Don't turn back - Killing is not an answer to killing

Desmond Tutu and the family of Martin Luther King, Jr. join Amnesty International members from 25 countries in urging no resumption of executions

On Sunday 19 January, Amnesty International is to place an advert in Jamaica's leading papers calling on the island's government and citizens to rethink their support for capital punishment. In the advert, Archbishop Desmond Tutu -- who recently described executions as "vengeance, not justice" -- and the family of Dr Martin Luther King Jr., joined Amnesty International members from 25 countries in opposing the resumption of executions in the Caribbean.

"The anger and fear felt by the people of the Caribbean as they face the horrific violence perpetrated by criminals is understandable. However, the perpetuation of killing via the death penalty is not the answer; it only serves to continue the cycle of violence," Amnesty International said today.

As the countries of the English speaking Caribbean seek to deal with alarming levels of violent crime, numerous political leaders in countries including Belize, Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago, have proposed the resumption of executions as one of the answers, citing the "will of the people" as justification.

"Political leaders should stop using their perception of public opinion as a justification for committing human rights violations under the guise of law," Amnesty International said.

"The death penalty is but an empty 'tough on crime' policy, popular with politicians who want to show they are dealing with violent crime, but it has never been shown to deter violent crime any more than other severe punishments. On the contrary, it could even cause more crime, due to the brutalising effect it has on society," the organization added.

Amnesty International urges the political leaders of the Caribbean to follow the example the Governor of the US State of Illinois, George Ryan, who on 11 January 2003 commuted the death sentences of all condemned prisoners in the state, having imposed a moratorium on executions in 2000. Four prisoners were released on the grounds of their likely innocence. Governor Ryan had previously been a proponent of the death penalty and had signed death warrants and overseen executions. Amongst his many reasons for the commutations, Governor Ryan cited flaws in the administration of the death penalty, such as the lack of safeguards against executing the innocent. Many similar flaws are present in the Caribbean but are ignored by governments.

More than 100 countries have turned their backs on judicial killing and numerous leaders have spoken out against the death penalty. Nelson Mandela described state killing as "barbaric". Russian President Putin, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and many others have opposed the death penalty, basing their stance on human rights values. In Kenya, the new government hopes to abolish capital punishment within the next six months. The justice minister, Kiraitu Murungi, recently stated: "We think the fundamental human right to life should be respected, and no human being should have the authority to take the life of another," and added, "Capital punishment is a barbaric punishment."

Background

Jamaica's government is currently proposing changes to the country's constitution to facilitate the resumption of executions by removing current legal protections for death row inmates. Citing executions as "the will of the people", the government claims the use of the death penalty will act as a deterrent to violent crime. Similar constitutional amendments have been passed in Barbados and are currently proposed in Belize. The government of Trinidad and Tobago has also signalled its intention to pass laws to make the resumption of executions easier.

The last execution in the region took place in the Bahamas in January 2000.

For more information about the death penalty in the English speaking Caribbean please see *State killing in the English Speaking Caribbean: a legacy of colonial times*, AI index AMR 05/003/2002, available at <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/Index/AMR050032002?OpenDocument&of=COUNTRIES\JAMAICA>

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