

PUBLIC

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Threats and intimidation/Fear for safety 28 January 2000

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Journalists and other media workers

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of journalists in Trinidad and Tobago, after a civil servant urged people to attack them.

On 24 January 2000 the government Unemployment Relief Programme organised a mass rally in support of ex-minister Dhanraj Singh. Speaking at the rally, Selwyn Sandy, a civil servant with the Unemployment Relief Programme, urged the crowd, mostly members of the ruling United National Congress (UNC) party, to abuse media workers. After chastising the media for criticising the government, he called for the media to be "chased away" and "humiliated", and not allowed to "lambaste" Singh, telling the crowd: "We are going to catch them".

Dhanraj Singh, who resigned this month as Minister for Local Government, has recently been questioned by the authorities in connection with the December 1999 murder of a local government official. He is now the subject of a police investigation in connection with the beating of two men at his constituency office in November 1999.

After Sandy's comments, the crowd assaulted a number of journalists and other media workers who were reporting on the rally.

At a press conference after the rally the president of the Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago - an organization active since 1995 in highlighting the government's attempts to limit press freedom - said he was "very disturbed" by Sandy's comments, adding that they could not be taken lightly. The Association has also written to the Commissioner of Police about its concerns.

Amnesty International is concerned that this may herald an escalation of violence towards the media in an attempt to stifle critical reporting of the government in the run-up to this summer's elections. Amnesty International believes that international pressure at this point could go some way towards ensuring that journalists are able to report events freely, without the threat of violence.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Journalists have been threatened and harassed many times since Prime Minister Basdeo Panday came to power in 1995. On several occasions journalists and other media workers have been attacked after the Prime Minister and other politicians have spoken out against the press.

The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed under the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 13 of the American Convention on the Rights of Man. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to ... seek, receive or impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at the threats against journalists and other media workers;
- urging the authorities to take adequate measures to guarantee their safety;
- calling for a prompt and thorough investigations into the threats, with the findings made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- expressing concern that journalists appear to have been targeted for their reporting on allegations of serious crimes;
- conveying Amnesty International's concern about the growing pattern of threats and attacks suffered by journalists in Trinidad and Tobago, and calling for

immediate and effective measures to stop this trend, politely requesting to be kept informed about the measures adopted.

APPEALS TO:

The Rt Hon. Basdeo Panday
Office of the Prime Minister
Level 19
Central Bank Tower
Eric Williams Plaza
Independence Square
Port-of-Spain
Trinidad and Tobago

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad

Fax: + 1 868 627 3444

E-mail: bpanday@trinidad.net

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

The Hon. Joseph Theodore
Minister of National Security
18 Knox Street
Port-of-Spain
Trinidad and Tobago

Fax: + 1 868 627 8044

Salutation: Dear Senator

Hilton Guy
Police Commissioner
Office of the Police Commissioner
Police Administration Building
Corner of Edward and Sackville St
Port-of-Spain

Fax: + 1 868 623 2585

COPIES TO:

President, Media Association for Trinidad and Tobago (MATT)
c/o Power 102 FM
88-90 Abercrombie St
Port-of-Spain
Trinidad and Tobago

Inter-American Press Association
International Center for Journalists
2911 39th Street, NW
Miami, FL 33142

Fax: + 1 (305) 635 2272

E-mail: info@sipiapa.org

and to diplomatic representatives of Trinidad and Tobago accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 10 March 2000.