

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 38/008/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 107
27 April 2004

Jamaica: Freedom of expression on trial

Amnesty International has today sought urgent clarification from the Director of Public Prosecutions following recent media reports stating that he has threatened to monitor and prosecute talk show hosts who discuss criminal cases pending before the courts.

The DPP also reportedly accused Amnesty International and other human rights organizations of trying to undermine his office through their "agitation" on cases of police killings.

"Freedom of expression includes free and open reporting on issues of public interest, such as the extraordinary high number of disputed police killings that occur in Jamaica."

"Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the threat of criminal sanction or excessive fines may lead to greater self-censorship from the media. This could negatively impact upon its role as watchdog and upon the public's right to receive information. We invite the DPP to retract his implicit threat against freedom of expression."

The comments were made just two weeks after the collapse of the trial of a police officer charged with the murder of 13-year-old Janice Allen in March 2000. The Prosecution failed to present any evidence on the opening day of the trial.

"Not one police officer has been convicted of an unlawful killing on duty in the last five years, despite compelling evidence suggesting that this practice exists," Amnesty International continued. "The DPP should concentrate on enabling his staff to perform the vital task entrusted to them under law: to build public trust through an independent, effective and impartial prosecuting service".

"Public figures such as the DPP must recognize and accept that criticism of public authorities, including individuals, is a legitimate role of the media, protected under international law."

Background Information

The Jamaican media reports on and encourages lively debate on a range of topics. Under its own Constitution and international human rights treaties that it has ratified, Jamaica has committed itself to upholding press freedom and other human rights.

Amnesty International would consider any talk show host or journalist imprisoned for their professional activities to be a prisoner of conscience. A prisoner of conscience is someone detained or imprisoned solely for their beliefs, or for their ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth or other status, who has not used or advocated violence.

Earlier this month, the DPP ruled that six police officers, including the former head of the disbanded Crime Management Unit (CMU), should be charged with murder arising from an incident last year. The six were accused of killing Lewena Thompson, Angella Richards, Kirk Gordon and Matthew James on 7 May 2003 during an operation in the rural community of Crawle in the central parish of Clarendon.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>