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Jamaica: Military must cooperate in investigation of killings

Physical evidence from autopsies and the crime scene supports eyewitness accounts of the deaths of Sandra Sewell and Gayon Alcott, said Olivia Streater, a Jamaica researcher at Amnesty International, releasing the preliminary findings from the organization's autopsy observations.

"There is now serious pressure on the Jamaican military and police authorities to ensure individual soldiers provide detailed explanations of what they did, and if they fired shots, why and when," said Ms Streater. "If the evidence suggests unlawful killings, it should be placed before a jury to decide."

Derrick Pounder, worldwide forensic expert and Professor of Forensic Medicine at the University of Dundee, observed the autopsies of Sandra Sewell and Gayon Alcott on behalf of Amnesty International. He also visited the scene of the killings, which occurred on 19 September in August Town.

"Sandra Sewell was killed instantly with a gunshot from a military rifle," said Professor Pounder. "The general circumstances do not suggest that she posed a threat to the life of officers at the time of the incident."

"She was shot in the back. Eye witnesses say she was crouching down trying to avoid gunfire at the time, so there is, on the face of it, corroboration of their statements," continued Professor Pounder.

"Gayon Alcott was shot twice -- first in the lane, and then again as he was being pursued, according to eye-witnesses, and the autopsy findings support this scenario."

Professor Pounder's detailed report of his findings will be submitted to the authorities upon request. The organization will also be submitting a memorandum of suggested low-cost improvements for forensic autopsy services to the Government of Jamaica.

Historically, investigations into allegations of excessive force by soldiers, such as the 1999 beating to death of Michael Gayle, have been marred by military's failure to disclose accurate, full information.

"In a meeting in March 2003, the Chief of Staff of the Jamaican Defence Force assured an Amnesty International delegation that human rights abuses by his soldiers would not be tolerated and that all allegations of abuses would be thoroughly investigated," said Ms Streater. "The military must now make good this statement, by providing full cooperation with police investigations."

Background information

Professor Pounder observed whether the autopsies were carried out in conformity with the principles embodied in the United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions (New York 1991).

On 19 September 2004, members of the Jamaican Defence Force allegedly killed community activist Sandra Sewell, and Gayon Alcott, a 20-year-old footballer, in August Town, St. Andrew. Eye-witnesses stated that soldiers approached Alcott because he was smoking marijuana and shot him in the stomach. As he attempted to flee the gunfire, soldiers shot him again. A soldier is alleged to have shot at Sandra Sewell as she sought protection from the gunfire. For more information, see previous statements at www.amnesty.org.

Amnesty International remains concerned at frequent reports of killings by members of the security forces, many of which appear to constitute extra-judicial executions, and by very high reported rates of violent crime. Over 1,000 people have been murdered in Jamaica since 1 January this year. At least nine police officers have been charged with murder. In 2003 at least 113 people were killed by members of the Jamaica Constabulary Force.

For the University of Dundee's Department of Forensic Medicine, see www.dundee.ac.uk/forensicmedicine.

Public Document

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