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English-speaking Caribbean: The death penalty -- a colonial legacy that must be abandoned

At a time when countries around the world are increasingly turning their backs on the use of the death penalty, Amnesty International today renewed its call on the English-speaking Caribbean countries to finally rid themselves of this cruel legacy of their colonial past.

Against the backdrop of the debate stirred by a recent Privy Council ruling that mandatory death penalty is unconstitutional, the organization is releasing today a report on the death penalty in the region.

The report will be presented in Kingston, Jamaica, by a panel including Amnesty International delegates, anti-death penalty campaigner Sister Helen Prejean, former death row inmate Delbert Tibbs, and Pat Clark, a leading member of US group Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation.

"We understand the anger of Caribbean citizens at the horrific murders they witness daily, and we share their outrage and hope that the violence will cease. We also understand the temptation to allow anger to turn into thirst for revenge. However, the death penalty is not the answer to reducing violent crime or healing society," Sister Helen Prejean said.

Apart from having no proven deterrent effect, the death penalty carries the inherent risk of killing an innocent as a result of judicial error.

"Judicial systems are run by human beings, and human beings make mistakes. It is inevitable that innocent people will be hung if the death penalty continues," said Delbert Tibbs, who spent three years on death row in Florida. "I have faced the prospect of my life being taken by the state for a crime I did not commit and I am here to represent the many men and women of the Caribbean who may be experiencing the same. No society should risk putting their fellow citizens through such an awful ordeal."

Amnesty International has found that the judicial systems of the English-speaking Caribbean that administer the death penalty fall short of international standards governing the imposition of capital punishment.

"International law requires that the most scrupulous and meticulous legal procedures are observed before a death sentence is imposed, but the Caribbean governments are failing to guarantee this," said Piers Bannister, the organization's researcher on the region.

"Inadequate provision for defence lawyers, both at the trial and on appeal, the imposition of death sentences on those suffering from mental health problems and the use of coerced confessions are all commonplace violations of international standards in the English-speaking Caribbean. Even the most ardent supporter of the death penalty should be

concerned at the quality of the judicial system employed to inflict the ultimate punishment," Piers Bannister added.

With its new report, Amnesty International is hoping to contribute to improve the level of the debate around the use of capital punishment. "At the present time, many people seem to believe that to oppose the death penalty means to condone the acts of those on death row. In reality, opposing executions is not about supporting criminality -- it's about believing that further killing is not the way forward for any society," the organization said.

"Having suffered the trauma of losing loved ones to murder, I understand the suffering of many people, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, as they struggle with such an appalling level of violent crime. However, the perpetuation of violence via state executions is not the answer to crime. I hope Caribbean societies will reexamine their support for capital punishment," Pat Clark added.

"Many political leaders in the Caribbean opposed the death penalty before their election, and some of them still do in private, while advocating it in public," Amnesty International noted, referring to recent statements by Jamaica's Attorney General that he does not believe in judicial killing.

"The time has come for these leaders to show human rights leadership and commit their governments to ending the death penalty. It is time to stop playing judicial politics with peoples' lives," the organization continued, adding that it is looking forward to a frank, open and respectful debate on the use of the death penalty with the governments of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, which have agreed to meet with the Amnesty International delegation.

Background

Sister Helen Prejean, the author of *Dead Man Walking*, is a Nobel Peace Prize Nominee and a leading figure in the fight against the death penalty in the USA. Sister Helen was spiritual advisor to Pat Sonnier, a man executed by the state of Louisiana in April 1984. Susan Sarandon's portrayal of Sister Helen in the acclaimed film of *Dead Man Walking* won the actress an Oscar.

Delbert Tibbs was held under a sentence of death in Florida, USA, for three years before being finally exonerated in 1982. Tibbs, an African American, was convicted by an all white jury for the murder of a white man. After finally dropping the charges, the original prosecutor declared that the case had been tainted from the start and that the investigators knew it.

Pat Clark, whose cousin and uncle were murder victims, is a leading member of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation (www.mvfr.org), a group composed of people who have lost loved ones to murder. The group campaigns against the death penalty under the banner "Not in our name".

**** Amnesty International's report *State killing in the English speaking Caribbean: a legacy of colonial times* will be available on the web at:
<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/AMR050032002>**

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