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Jamaica: Comments deriding those defending human rights -- damaging and divisive

Leaders in Jamaican society should promote human rights, not attack those who seek to protect them, Amnesty International said today.

This follows recent public comments by the Minister for National Security, K D Knight, and the Reverend Irving Townsend who misrepresented those defending human rights, claiming they care little for police officers killed in the line of duty and labelling them "human rights wimps".

"Amnesty International and similar organizations seek to uphold the universality of human rights," the organization stressed. "Human rights protect the best amongst society as well as the worst -- from the police officer protecting the innocent to the criminal seeking to do harm - - which is why they protect all of us."

"The denial of the human rights of those murdered, including police officers killed in the line of duty, does not validate or justify the denial of the human rights of any other individual," Amnesty International added.

Amnesty International would uphold the right of any police officer to protect members of the public or themselves. To this end, the organization works to promote the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, which states: "Law enforcement officials may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty" and "...officials who comply with the provisions of this Code deserve the respect, the full support and the co-operation of the community...".

The right of an officer to protect themselves and the human rights of members of the public are not mutually exclusive. The killing of Michael Gayle last August by members of the security forces and the murder of Detective Maurice Shirley are both indefensible acts, the perpetrators of which should be punished.

As organizations which have been founded to campaign on behalf of the victims of human rights abuses, it is unfair and incorrect to portray Amnesty International and others concerned with these matters as uncaring about the victims of violence. Human rights groups are clearly working to lessen the violence prevalent in countries such as Jamaica and therefore are striving to lessen the number of victims of such violence -- be it committed by a member of the security forces or a criminal.

Amnesty International does not "parade" itself as a "bastion of justice" as alleged by Reverend Townsend. The organization campaigns for nations to adhere to the standards and laws jointly agreed by member states of the United Nations. Therefore, we ask nothing of Jamaica which the country has not agreed to via its participation at the United Nations.

"As leaders in their communities, Minister Knight and Reverend Townsend should use their influence to encourage everyone to respect the human rights of others. Their recent comments implying that the rights

of police officers and others were somehow in conflict with each other is highly divisive," Amnesty International stressed

Amnesty International believes that the people of Jamaica deserve a well trained, equipped, motivated and respectful police force to protect them from those who seek to harm them. In return, the police force deserve the respect and support of the public in their difficult and often dangerous work.

"Their implication that the police cannot protect themselves while respecting the human rights of others is mistaken. As is the impression their comments inferred that those who seek to hold the police to universal standards of human rights are uncaring of security personnel's safety," the organization said.

Amnesty International has also written to Minister Knight outlining its concerns at the recent comments made by the Police Federation labelling the human rights group Jamaicans for Justice as "suspicious" and stating the Federation will monitor the group "closely".

Amnesty International fears these statements may encourage police officers to harass Jamaicans for Justice and calls upon Minister Knight to ensure the group's right to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression are not infringed upon.

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