

OPEN LETTER

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The Rt Hon P. J. Patterson, PC, QC, MP,
Office of the Prime Minister
Jamaica House
1 Devon Road
Kingston 6
Jamaica

3 August 1999

Dear Prime Minister,

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by reports of an incident which took place in Montego Bay in 17 July 1999, involving ill-treatment by police officers and unconfirmed deaths in police custody.

It is reported that police officers used force including a chemical spray, thought to be Oleoresin Capsicum (pepper spray) to remove homeless people from the centre of Montego Bay.

Reports of the arrests indicate that police officers acted contrary to Provision 4 of the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials which states "law enforcement officials, in carrying out their duty, shall, as far as possible, apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms. They may use force and firearms only if other means remain ineffective or without any promise of achieving the intended result."

Amnesty International is concerned that pepper spray was used by police officers in such circumstances. A growing number of studies have warned of the potential dangers of using the spray, including the risk of death. Given the dangers associated with the use of this weapon Amnesty International urges your government to introduce strict guidelines and limitations on its use, with clear monitoring procedures.

We are also extremely concerned by reports that those detained were taken to the edge of a mud lake in St. Elizabeth that night, in the belief they were being taken to a hospital. Some of those detained state that when they were taken from the truck it was still dark and police officers tried to dupe them into running into the mud lake. There are reportedly six people missing who are believed to have drowned.

We understand that the Commissioner of Police is conducting an investigation in to the incident. In the circumstances however Amnesty International is calling on the government to establish an independent inquiry to examine the use of force by police officers and the unconfirmed deaths in police custody. We also urge you to investigate the arbitrary detention and deprivation of liberty of those detained that night.

Some of those who were detained and have now returned to Montego Bay claim that they have been intimidated and have received death threats for giving accounts of the events which took place on 17 July, we urge the government to offer these people protection.

Yours sincerely,

Javier Zúñiga
Americas Program Director

