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Jamaica: Right to defend human rights is legitimate and must be protected

Amnesty International is seeking urgent clarification from the Minister for National Security, Dr. Peter Philipps, and the Commissioner of Police, Francis Forbes, as to the policy of the Jamaican authorities towards human rights groups, in the light of comments made by a senior-ranking police officer accusing the United Nations, Amnesty International and national human rights groups of influencing, attracting and protecting criminals.

Amnesty International is urgently seeking answers as to whether it is the official policy of the state to regard human rights groups as sanctioning criminality, following comments by the Head of the Crime Management Unit (CMU) that "criminals have infiltrated civil rights groups".

"In the current climate, such statements could be interpreted as encouraging violence or intimidation against individuals and groups working to protect and defend the human rights of all citizens," the organization said.

Amnesty International fears that the portrayal of human rights promotion work as a "criminal or subversive activity" is of particular grave concern given the current climate of fear which follows the recent appalling killing of five police officers, killings which the organization strongly condemns.

"We fear that the aim of this attack against human rights defenders is to silence or undermine their complaints so that the perpetrators of human rights violations may escape criminal prosecution," the organization said.

"In order to end to the harassment and intimidation of human rights activists, the Jamaican authorities must send a clear signal that human rights work is legitimate and valuable, and that no attack on those carrying it out will be tolerated."

Background:

The right to defend human rights is internationally recognised. Three years ago, on 9 December 1998, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, commonly known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

The adoption of this Declaration is international recognition of the crucial role that human rights

defenders are playing across the world in advancing the promotion and protection of human rights. By establishing a set of principles to safeguard this important work and those who carry it out, the Declaration highlights the increasing significance of the role of individuals and groups from civil society in independently scrutinizing and criticizing official policy and practice on human rights.

The Senior Superintendent of the Jamaica Constabulary Force was speaking on the radio news programme, The Breakfast Club, on 4 July 2002. The CMU, headed by the Senior Superintendent, has been implicated in numerous alleged extrajudicial executions and acts of torture.

The officer reportedly agreed with a commentator's question that, "Criminals have been able to infiltrate the civil rights groups..." and further stated "and they have been able to influence them and attract them to their organization with a view of protecting them. The best protected people now anywhere in Jamaica, anywhere almost in the world are the criminals... and I am not even talking Jamaica human rights alone, its coming from Amnesty International, right from the United Nations, it is set up particularly to protect the criminals, not their rights...." He also made accusations against a national human rights organisation: "I have seen members of FAST while I am executing my duty...spying on me, observing on me, taking photographs of me..."

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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>

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