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Jamaica: police killings -- a human rights emergency

With 140 deaths at the hands of the police in 2000 alone, Jamaica has the highest rate of police killings per capita in the world, Amnesty International's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, said today as the organization launched a worldwide action to halt human rights abuses being committed by the Jamaican security forces.

A report published today, details Amnesty International's long-held concerns about police brutality, torture and killings in Jamaica. These include chronic inadequate or lacking investigations into police killings and the authorities' reluctance to charge and bring to trial law enforcement officers suspected of human rights abuses. The report also contains specific recommendations to address and decrease the number of unlawful police killings.

"When I met with the Prime Minister of Jamaica in September last year, he assured me that the human rights of all Jamaicans are protected. Since the day of that meeting, the police have killed at least 65 people," Mr. Sané said.

"We acknowledge that the police have a right to protect themselves and the public when threatened, but we ask ourselves, >was every one of those deaths necessary to preserve the safety of those present?"

"John Spencer, George Williams, Patrick Brightly, Wayne Silvera, Glenford Williams, the list of dead goes on. While some of those killed might have posed a genuine threat to the police and public, others surely did not. Police officers responsible for those killings must be held accountable," Mr. Sané said.

Amnesty International acknowledges the danger of confrontations with gunmen and expresses its sympathy for those officers killed in the line of duty. Similarly, the organization recognizes the duty of the authorities to protect Jamaican society from violent crime, but the inherent peril of policing Jamaica's streets cannot excuse the use of excessive or lethal force by officers or the extrajudicial execution of suspects or others.

As recently as 14 March 2001, the police killed seven young men in Braeton, Kingston. The police claimed the men fired upon them after officers arrived at the house they were in and requested them to give themselves up. According to the police, all seven were killed when the gun fire was returned. However, residents in the area claim they heard the men pleading for officers to spare their lives before the police took the men back inside the house one at a time and apparently executed them.

"The trust between the guardians of law and order and the Jamaica public has been clearly damaged by the level of police violence," Mr. Sané said. "As acknowledged by the recent Police Executive Research Forum report, >For many citizens the police are to be feared, not embraced...' If the problem of violent crime in Jamaica is to be cured, the police must win back the confidence of the general public."

"It is time for the authorities to translate their repeated statements committing themselves to the protection of human rights into actions," Mr. Sané said. "The Jamaican population and the international community can no longer accept excuses that limited resources or the high crime rate act as a restriction to the full protection of human rights in Jamaica."

Amnesty International is urging the Jamaican government to devise and implement a nation human rights plan of action to protect the people of Jamaica from human rights violations. Such a plan should have clear goals, guidelines and strategies. Its formulation should involve all sections of society, including the security forces, human rights groups and civil society, as well as the human rights sections of the United Nations and other international bodies.

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