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## *English speaking Caribbean -- a tradition of free speech that must be upheld*

*Journalists and media workers in the Caribbean face government attempts to introduce legislation that could limit their freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today as the world celebrates Press Freedom Day.*

*Only two of the English speaking countries in the region -- Jamaica and Grenada -- have signed the Inter-American Press Association's Chapultepec declaration, devised to promote and protect the freedom of the press, and a variety of measures curtailing such freedom are in place in many of these countries.*

*"Criticizing the authorities can provoke an alarming reaction from politicians in some Caribbean countries," the organization added.*

*In January this year, journalists and reporters in Trinidad and Tobago were assaulted by the crowd after a civil servant made inflammatory statements against the media at a public rally.*

*Journalists have often been the target of harassment and threats in the country since Basdeo Panday's accession to power as Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister in 1995. The Prime Minister and other government officials have often expressed violent criticism of the media, which has resulted in threats and physical attacks on journalists and media workers. In January, Prime Minister Panday branded several media outlets "enemies" and invited his supporters to wage "virtual war" against them.*

Those under attack feel not enough is being done to improve the situation and have expressed the need for international pressure on the authorities in Trinidad and Tobago. As one journalist put it, "This is the most challenging period for journalists in Trinidad and Tobago for the last 10 years. I don't think any government would want to think its international image was being sullied by its treatment of the media and [Amnesty International's and other international organizations'] efforts to expose the threats made can only help us."

"The Trinidad and Tobago authorities should refrain from remarks that could incite violence against the media, especially in the light of the upcoming elections when the political climate could heat up," Amnesty International said.

"It is the responsibility of the authorities to ensure that all citizens, including those whose job it is to gather and disseminate information, enjoy full freedom of expression," the organization added.

Elsewhere in the region, journalists have been arrested and charged with criminal offences in connection with their professional activities.

In Grenada, broadcast journalist Stanley Charles was accused of sedition based on statements he made on a radio show after the sudden resignation of Grenada's foreign Affairs Minister.

In the Bahamas, senator and radio journalist Obie Wilchcombe was sentenced to four days in prison for protecting the confidentiality of his sources of information. His sentence was later stayed and his case is under appeal.

"If this sentence is confirmed and Obie Wilchcombe is imprisoned, Amnesty International would consider him a prisoner of conscience --

and therefore call for his immediate and unconditional release -- as the charges against him are motivated by him exercising the right to freedom of expression," the organization said.

Amendments to legislation proposed in various countries in the English speaking Caribbean also indicate disturbing attempts at limiting free expression through the media.

For example in Jamaica, the recently debated Anti-Corruption Bill contained a clause providing for fines and imprisonment for journalists who publish leaked information given to the Commission charged with investigating alleged corruption among civil servants.

However, the bill was put on hold following vocal criticism and demonstrations from leading media personnel, backed by a widespread cross-section of civil society.

The English speaking Caribbean has a long tradition of vigorous political debate that is healthy for any democracy. Amnesty International urges politicians in the region to accept the debate of ideas and criticism in a constructive manner.

"The governments of the Caribbean states must take action to uphold the region's tradition of free speech and to ensure the full protection in law and practice of the right to freedom of expression of all their citizens, including journalists and media workers," the organization said.

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