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Jamaica: Braeton officers charged - - milestone in ending police impunity

Amnesty International today welcomed the announcement that six police officers will be charged in connection with the killing of seven young men on 14 March 2001.

"The road to justice for the seven young men killed on that March morning has so far been long and hard. It has taken over two and a half years to get to this point. The announcement that six police officers are to face trial for the killings is a welcome milestone on the journey for police accountability on this incident," Amnesty International said.

The organization hopes that the charging of the officers will send a strong message that unlawful acts by police officers will not be tolerated.

However, Amnesty International is baffled as to why the charges are limited to the lower ranks of the officers who took part in the operation.

"The officer who commanded this operation has not been charged. If those under his command are to be charged, at the very least there is evidence that he must have acted to pervert the course of justice and committed perjury at the Corner's Court Inquiry. However, he remains a serving police officer. We believe that every officer who is implicated in these killings should be charged with the appropriate offence," the organization added.

Amnesty International will continue to monitor the progress of the prosecutions and will send observers to the trial of the officers.

The organization calls on the Director of Public Prosecutions to vigorously prosecute the case and to ensure that the jury has all the available evidence. The organization also remains mindful that the charged officers have the right to a fair trial and. Like the Police Federation, the officers should be vigorously defended in court. The authorities should not seek the death penalty against the officers.

While the charging of these officers is a welcome development, Amnesty International remains concerned at the overall situation in Jamaica. Every police killing should normally be adequately investigated by the authorities. Yet, numerous investigations remain mired in the system. The people of Jamaica should not have to wait two and a half years for the investigations into the killings at Flankers, Crawle and others to be completed.

Numerous cases remain of concern to the organization, notably the police killings of Patrick Geinus and Michael Gayle.

"Those police officers who work within the law to protect Jamaican society will welcome this decision as a step towards repairing the damage caused by such killings to the public confidence in the

Jamaican Constabulary Force. For those officers who take the law into their own hands, the message must be that your unlawful acts will not be tolerated," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

On 14 March 2001, seven young men and boys - Reagon Beckford, aged 15, Lancebert Clark, 19, Christopher Grant, 17, Curtis Smith, 20, Andre Virgo, 20, Dane Reynaldo Whyte, 19, and Tamayo Wilson, 20, now commonly known as the "Braeton Seven" - were killed just before dawn, by officers from the Crime Management Unit, a specialist unit within the Jamaica Constabulary Force.

In witness statements the police claimed to have come under fire from inside a house after identifying themselves and requesting those inside to surrender. Officers claimed that they subsequently returned the fire as police entered the house and shot at the "flashes" visible from the guns of those shooting. All seven young men were killed outright after receiving 46 gunshot wounds in total; of which 15 were to the head.

Local residents told a different story and gave testimonies detailing how the young men begged for mercy before being shot one at a time by law enforcement officers. Although investigations were conducted by the police and an independent civilian investigative unit, no one has been held accountable. A coroner's inquest later returned a 6-4 verdict that no-one should be held criminally responsible for the youths' deaths. Amnesty International believes the inquest proceedings were flawed in import respects.

Public Document

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