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Trinidad and Tobago: Human rights issues must be debated publicly

In the wake of the recent comments made by the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago on the work of Amnesty International, the human rights organization today renewed its invitation to publicly debate the human rights issues facing Trinidad and Tobago.

On Friday 18 August Attorney General Ramesh Maharaj accused the organization of being involved in a "political act to destabilise" Caribbean countries and of making "unfounded and mischievous" allegations.

"In September I will be visiting Port-of-Spain to promote respect for human rights in Trinidad and Tobago. This would be the perfect opportunity to debate openly and constructively many of the important human rights issues the Attorney General has recently raised in the media," said Pierre Sané, Amnesty International Secretary General.

To date, the Attorney General has not responded to the Amnesty International's numerous requests for a meeting to discuss human rights and has publicly stated he has "nothing" to debate with the organization.

The organization refutes the allegation that it seeks to "destabilise" Caribbean countries and therefore "coerce" them into abolishing the death penalty.

"We hold every government of the world to the same standards regarding human rights, and openly oppose the use of the death penalty regardless of any political consideration," Pierre Sané said.

The Attorney General's comments were made in response to Amnesty International's Annual Report 2000 entry for Trinidad and Tobago which stated that the authorities failed to allow the courts to review new evidence received on the eve of Russell Sankerali's execution, which may have cast doubts on his guilt.

"We believe that the value of this new evidence should have been ascertained by the courts of law, not by politicians who may be influenced by public support for the death penalty and therefore by the political advantages of executions," Pierre Sané added.

While the Attorney General's commitment to address the Human Rights Committee at the United Nations this autumn is a positive step, Amnesty International believes that the curtailment of people's rights resulting from the unprecedented withdrawal of Trinidad and Tobago from both the American Convention on Human Rights and from the Optional Protocol of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights needs to be promptly addressed.

"The Attorney General will stand before the Committee as one of the few government officials who has weakened his country's adherence to mechanisms designed to protect citizens' rights under international standards," Pierre Sané said.

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