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TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: URGENT APPEAL TO STOP FIRST EXECUTION FOR 14 YEARS

Amnesty International is urgently appealing to the Trinidad and Tobago authorities to stop an execution scheduled to take place tomorrow, which would be the first execution to be carried out in the country in more than 14 years.

"Only yesterday the authorities announced that Glen Ashby would be executed tomorrow," Amnesty International said. "Both the speed with which this has been done and the fact that last week Ashby submitted an appeal to the Human Rights Committee -- which is obviously still pending -- directly flouts international human rights standards."

Glen Ashby, convicted for murder, has been on death row for four years and 11 months. In just one month's time, his lengthy wait on death row would have constituted inhuman or degrading punishment or treatment -- as the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (JCPC) in London ruled in November last year -- and his death sentence should then have been commuted.

Other disturbing reports indicate that both government and media statements have incited public fury against lawyers for defending murderers. Ashby's defence lawyers and their families have reportedly been receiving death threats as a result and Amnesty International calls on the Trinidad and Tobago authorities to guarantee protection for them.

Amnesty International published a report this week calling on the Trinidad and Tobago authorities to amend legislation to restrict the use of the death penalty, with a view to abolishing it altogether in the future.

Despite two government-appointed Commissions of Inquiry recommending the abolition of mandatory death sentences, successive governments have taken no steps to implement this recommendation.

The Trinidad and Tobago authorities have not executed anyone for more than 14 years, though several attempts have been made to resume executions in the last few years.

These attempts appear to have been politically motivated, coinciding with increases in violent crime, despite being in violation of international law.

Amnesty International does not in any way condone violent crime, but there is no evidence that the death penalty deters crime more effectively than other punishments and there is also always the risk of executing innocent people.

The number of people on death row in Trinidad and Tobago reached nearly 110 last year. However, as a result of the ruling by the JCPC, Trinidad and Tobago's final court of appeal, nearly half the prisoners had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment and there are now around 60 people under sentence of death.

"The move to resume executions in Trinidad and Tobago is out of line not only with world trends, but also with developments in the Caribbean region, where executions have become increasingly rare," Amnesty International said.

"The government must urgently prevent Glen Ashby's execution and ensure that he and other prisoners on death row are given the time and facilities to pursue all avenues of appeal open to them, including appeals to relevant international bodies."

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