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Jamaica: First police officer in over six years convicted of murder while on duty

Amnesty International today welcomed the conviction of a police officer from the Jamaican Constabulary Force of the murder of a 25 year-old man in November 2000 -- the first conviction of a Jamaican police officer for murder committed while on duty since October 1999. The organization, however, expressed concern that there continues to be insufficient will on the part of the security and justice systems in Jamaica to effectively tackle impunity for police killings.

"While this is a positive development in the fight against impunity for police killings, this is just the tip of the iceberg, and is not enough to restore the public's faith in the Jamaican judicial system," said Susan Lee, Director of Amnesty International's America Programme.

Constable Glenroy McDermoth was sentenced yesterday to life imprisonment for the killing of Michael Dorsett, who he shot in the back on 9 November 2000 while on patrol with other police officers. Constable McDermoth had stated that the victim and another man had opened fire on the police patrol and he had returned fire to protect himself and his colleagues. Scientific evidence presented by the prosecution, however, showed that no gunpowder residue was found on the deceased's hands.

Since October 1999 there have been more than 800 police killings in Jamaica, many of which have been blatantly unlawful killings. With the exception of Michael Dorsett, none of these cases has led to a conviction or has even been the subject of an independent and impartial investigation. Amnesty International has acknowledged and welcomed the recent greater willingness by the Jamaican authorities to charge officers accused of murder. However, the failure to secure convictions in cases of unlawful killings is a serious stumbling block to achieving real justice.

"Not only does the continuing lack of convictions send a message that the police force can act with impunity, it hinders the families of the victims in their attempts to come to terms with their bereavement," she added.

Amnesty International has for many years campaigned alongside Jamaican human rights organizations to call for an end to police impunity and the overwhelming lack of accountability in the Jamaican security and justice systems, asking the Jamaican authorities to show the necessary political will to ensure that all police killings are thoroughly and independently investigated to international standards.

Background Information

The level of police killings in Jamaica is amongst one of the highest per capita in the world. In 2005 there were reportedly 168 fatal shootings by police, the highest in 14 years. The last conviction of a police officer

known to Amnesty International was in October 1999, when three officers were convicted of the murder of David Black, who was beaten to death in Trelawny police station in September 1995. Six police officers were acquitted in December 2005 of the murders of two women and two men in Crawle in May 2003, despite strong evidence that police officers had attempted to alter the crime scene to make it appear that the victims had fired at the police.

In recent years Amnesty International has documented numerous failings of the investigative system for police killings, including the lack of investigating officers, the authorities failure to protect the scene of killings, inadequate autopsies on the bodies and failure to take statements from the officers concerned in a timely manner.

Public Document

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