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Guyana: Urgent action needed on witness protection

The murder of George Bacchus, a self-confessed death squad "informant", two days before he was due to testify in related criminal proceedings demonstrates once again the urgent need for a comprehensive protection scheme in Guyana, Amnesty International said today.

"Since allegations of the existence of a death squad in Guyana surfaced six months' ago, Amnesty International has repeatedly urged the Guyanese authorities to take action to protect individuals involved in investigations regarding murder, "disappearance" or other crimes."

George Bacchus had been due to testify this week at the preliminary inquiry of two police officers charged with the murder of his brother, Shafeek, on 5 January. Bacchus claimed that he had been the intended victim and that members of the death squad were responsible. Gunmen reportedly burst into Bacchus' home early Thursday morning and shot him dead.

On Wednesday, the Chief Magistrate heading the preliminary inquiry quit, citing reports that she was on a death squad "hit list".

"The Guyanese authorities are under a legal obligation to take proactive measures to investigate these latest incidents thoroughly and impartially, along with other credible allegations that a death squad has murdered, "disappeared" and tortured numerous individuals since 2002. Anyone found responsible must be brought to justice."

"In light of reports alleging the involvement of members of the security forces, neither the Guyana Police Force nor the Ministry of National Security should be linked to related investigations or witness protection efforts. The authorities must protect victims' relatives, witnesses, members of the judiciary, lawyers, journalists, police officers and human rights defenders against all forms of intimidation," Amnesty International concluded.

Background Information

In January 2004, George Bacchus made public allegations about the existence of a death squad or squads with members including existing and former police officers. On 7 May, the Minister of Home Affairs announced that he would vacate his office to allow an inquiry to proceed after Bacchus alleged the Minister's involvement in the squad. On 15 May the President of Guyana announced an inquiry, pursuant to the Commissions of Inquiry Act 1933. The inquiry has not yet commenced. Another man charged with the murder of Shafeek Bacchus died in custody on 1 February.

Public Document

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