

22 August 2000

AI Index AMR 38/008/2000 - News Service Nr. 161

Jamaica: human rights defenders must be supported

The legitimate work of human rights defenders in Jamaica must be publicly supported by the authorities, and any attack on them must be condemned, Amnesty International said today in an open letter to the Rt. Honourable P. J. Patterson, Prime Minister of Jamaica.

The organization expressed concern about the safety of Mrs. Dahlia Allen, attorney representing some twenty inmates at the St. Catherine Adult Correctional Centre, Spanish Town, who have allegedly been the victims of ill-treatment by prison guards. Mrs. Allen has been intimidated and harassed in relation to her attempts to represent the inmates during the hearings of the Commission of Inquiry.

In particular, Amnesty International is concerned about reports of threats claiming that state agents connected with St. Catherine's District prison are planning to kill Mrs. Allen, that her activities are under surveillance and her telephone line has been tapped.

"Such threats and intimidation totally unacceptable," the organization said, urging the Prime Minister to take all the measures necessary to ensure that Mrs. Allen is not targeted in any way as a result of her legitimate human rights work to represent her clients, who have the right under domestic and international legislation to legal representation and to have their allegations investigated by a competent authority.

Background

Human rights defenders are individuals and groups who pressurise governments to live up to obligations incumbent in human rights treaties

and conventions ratified in international fora such as the United Nations. This role is important because the distance between government rhetoric and reality is often enormous. In all societies, no matter how democratic they may appear, independent scrutiny by civil society makes an important contribution to ensuring that states protect human rights and conduct their activities within the parameters of the law.

On 9 December 1998, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders).

This Declaration clearly recognizes the important role of those who promote and defend human rights and includes a series of principles aimed at ensuring that States work closely with them to guarantee them the freedom to carry out their legitimate activities without hindrance or reprisals.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>