

PUBLIC

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Politically motivated attack on journalist

19 May 2000

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Professor Selwyn Cudjoe, journalist

Two men have forced their way into the house of outspoken government critic Professor Selwyn Cudjoe, assaulting his sister and firing shots. The men made no attempt to rob the house, and Amnesty International believes the attack may have been politically motivated, intended to intimidate or harm Professor Cudjoe.

The men came to the house in Tacarigua, Trinidad, on 8 May at 7.30pm, and asked his family, "Where Cudjoe?". His sister says the men grabbed her when she challenged them, covering her mouth to stop her screaming. They then ran away, producing a gun as they went and firing shots. Professor Cudjoe was not in the house at the time.

The family reported the attack to the police, who took over an hour to respond because, according to press reports, they "only had one vehicle".

Professor Cudjoe is an outspoken critic of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, who has a weekly newspaper column called "Countdown to Panday's Political Oblivion", a reference to Prime Minister Basdeo Panday. Cudjoe has been quoted in the press as stating: "Any logical person would see this as intimidation. I am not into drugs. I have always lived a clean, decent life. I can only see this as a political attack."

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International is concerned at the prospect of political violence in the run-up to elections in Trinidad and Tobago.

The chairperson of the Rio Claro/Mayaro Regional Corporation, Hansraj Sumairsingh, was murdered earlier this year in what many suspect was a political killing. The police and others reportedly suspected he was killed because he complained about the possibly corrupt administration of the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP), a government programme to train released prisoners who are without paid work. A month before he was killed, Sumairsingh had written to the Prime Minister regarding the running of the URP. He had also written to the Prime Minister in December 1999, claiming he had been threatened by a government official, whom he named.

On 16 May 2000, Prime Minister Panday made a public speech announcing that the Government wanted to abolish the URP.

The police originally investigated the government minister responsible for the URP, Local Government Minister Dhanraj Singh, in connection with Sumairsingh's murder. To date, Amnesty International is not aware of anyone having been charged in connection with the killing of Hansraj Sumairsingh.

Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action earlier this year on politically-motivated violence against journalists (UA 23/00, AMR 49/02/00, 28 January), after a URP civil servant urged people at a rally to attack media workers. Journalists have continued to face abuse by politicians and government ministers, including Prime Minister Panday, who publicly listed his "enemies" and called on his supporters to wage "virtual war" on those who criticised the government.

In February 2000, a leading journalist in Trinidad and Tobago told an Amnesty International delegation: "This is the most challenging period for journalists in Trinidad and Tobago for the last 10 years. I don't think any government would want to think its international image was being sullied by its treatment of the media and [Amnesty International's and other international organizations'] efforts to expose the threats made can only help us."

The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed under the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Article 13 of the American Convention on the Rights of Man. Under Article 19 of the United Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to...seek, receive or impart information and ideas through any media."

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at the attack on the home of Professor Selwyn Cudjoe;
- expressing concern at the reports that the police were extremely slow in responding to the family's call for assistance;
- urging the authorities to take adequate measures to guarantee the safety of Selwyn Cudjoe and his family;
- asking the authorities to ensure the investigation into the attack is thorough and that those responsible are brought to justice;
- conveying Amnesty International's concern about the growing pattern of threats and attacks on journalists in Trinidad and Tobago, and calling for immediate and effective measures to stop this trend, politely asking to be kept informed about the measures adopted.

APPEALS TO:

The Rt Hon. Basdeo Panday
Office of the Prime Minister
Level 19
Central Bank Tower
Eric Williams Plaza
Independence Square
Port-of-Spain

Tel: + 1 868 623 3653/3669
Fax: + 1 868 627 3444
E-mail: bpanday@trinidad.net
Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

The Hon. Joseph Theodore
Minister of National Security
18 Knox Street
Port-of-Spain

Tel: + 1 868 623 2441/5
Fax: + 1 868 627 8044
Salutation: Dear Senator

Mr Hilton Guy
Police Commissioner
Office of the Police Commissioner
Police Administration Building
Corner of Edward and Sackville St
Port-of-Spain
Trinidad and Tobago

Fax: + 1 868 623 2585
Salutation: Dear Commissioner

and to diplomatic representatives of Trinidad and Tobago accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 30 June 2000.