

12 May 2000

Trinidad and Tobago: Attorney General embarks on campaign of misinformation

The Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago seems to be deliberately misleading the nation's population about international human rights law and wantonly attacking those who seek to protect human rights, Amnesty International said today.

"The comments of the Attorney General, as reported in the press, are grossly inaccurate and misleading," the organization's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, added. "This appears to be an attempt to gain support for the passing of laws which further limit the rights of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago."

The Attorney General's attack on Amnesty International appears to be motivated by his wanting support for the Constitution Amendment No2 Bill, popularly known as the "Hanging Bill". The Bill seeks to allow Trinidad and Tobago to execute prisoners before the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) or the UN Human Rights Commission (HRC) have ruled in their cases.

It was claimed that the delay caused by the IACHR and the HRC considering these cases has led to prisoners having their sentences commuted under the five year "Pratt and Morgan" ruling. However, this is not the case. The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council recently ruled that if these bodies take a prolonged time to examine cases, this time will not count towards the five year limit.

"Prisoners taking claims of violations of their rights to these international bodies is not stopping executions in Trinidad and Tobago. Amnesty International fears that this law would in effect remove the right to have your case examined by jurists outside of the country and would therefore lessen the judicial protection," Pierre Sané said.

The Attorney General accused Amnesty International of "disregarding" the rights of the victims of crime and of having attempted to "discredit" the government of Trinidad.

"Amnesty International refutes all of these charges. The Attorney General joins the long list of government officials that, when their country is accused of human rights violations, choose to attack Amnesty International instead of addressing the organization's concerns," Pierre Sané added.

"Amnesty International was founded to campaign on behalf of the victims of human rights abuses, and it is unfair and incorrect to portray it as uncaring about the victims of violence. In fact, the organization is working to reduce the number of victims of institutionalised violence, such as torture, police brutality and executions."

"Expediting executions creates more victims -- the family. The men and women on death row have mothers, fathers, families and friends, all of whom will suffer the loss of a loved one at the hands of the state. How would the Attorney General comfort these victims?," asked Mr Sané.

In view of the accusation of selectively targeting the governments of third world countries "with the intent of punishing those countries that carry out the death penalty", Amnesty International pointed out that it requests the respect of international human rights standards by all countries, regardless of the political views of their governments, the conditions of their economy or their international status.

"Our last major international campaign was for human rights in the United States of America -- hardly a developing country. We campaign for nations to adhere to the standards and laws jointly agreed by member states of the United Nations. Therefore, we ask nothing of Trinidad and Tobago which the country has not agreed to via its participation at the United Nations."

Amnesty International calls upon the government of Trinidad and Tobago to show clear leadership in educating the population about international human rights standards and laws.

"In September this year, I intend to visit Trinidad and Tobago on behalf of Amnesty International. I would like to invite the Attorney General to publicly debate during my visit the human rights issues he has raised," Pierre Sané concluded.

ENDS.../

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