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## **Jamaica: Poor communities held hostage to gang violence and government neglect**

(Kingston) Amnesty International today criticized the Jamaican authorities for wilfully neglecting poor Jamaicans by failing to tackle the corruption and violence that is shattering their inner-city communities.

“Poor inner-city Jamaicans are paying the price of this public security crisis with their lives. They are being held hostage in an endless confrontation between criminal gangs, police officers who kill with impunity and authorities who are failing to protect their human rights,” said Fernanda Doz Costa, Amnesty International’s researcher on Jamaica.

In a new report released today at a press conference in Kingston, the organization revealed the reality of the hundreds of thousands of Jamaicans condemned to live with violent criminal gangs and abusive policing, and stigmatized by the authorities.

Jamaica has one of the highest rates of violence and police killings in the Americas with around 1,500 homicides and 272 police killings in 2007 – an average of three homicides a day and three police killings every four days. Most of the victims of violent crime live in deprived communities – where they also suffer from unemployment, poor access to health and education services, limited supplies of drinking water and poor sanitation.

People living in inner-city communities are left at the mercy of gang leaders who use the vacuum left by the state to control huge aspects of their lives -- including the collection of “taxes”, allocation of jobs, distribution of food and “scholarships”, and the punishment of those who transgress gang rules.

Criminal gangs were created in the 1960’s by the two main political parties – People’s National Party (PNP) and Jamaica Labour Party (JLP). Jamaican governments and political leaders have actively helped create and maintain the environment in which gang violence could flourish.

Violence in these communities is particularly high when rival gangs are “at war” over territorial control. Entire populations are shut down by barricades and unable to leave their homes after 5pm. As a result, children don’t go to school out of fear and adults don’t go to work because transport is suspended.

As one woman from an inner-city community told Amnesty International, “At night we had to sleep on the floor, all of us, the children, the grandma, all of us; covered by the mattress because sometimes the shots can go through the house and kill us.”

“Criminal gangs make up a small proportion of the community population but their actions are devastating: they keep thousands of people living in constant fear and provide an excuse for government officials to label

all community members as criminals,” said Fernanda Doz Costa.

Despite the violence they experience daily, community members are reluctant to report abuses due to fear of reprisals by gang leaders, lack of confidence in the judicial system and mistrust of police officers working in their communities.

“There are many good serving police officers in Jamaica who risk their lives every day to help improve security for Jamaican citizens. However, the political determination to bring human rights abusers to justice and purge corruption is still lacking,” said Fernanda Doz Costa.

Amnesty International calls on the Jamaican authorities to take urgent and effective measures to tackle the underlying causes of this public security and human rights crisis – including the reduction of homicide rates in inner-cities, the introduction of human rights-based policing, and the reform of the judicial system to improve access to justice.

“The conversation that needs to take place in Jamaica is no longer about ‘ifs’ or ‘hows’ but about when to make the changes needed to stop the crisis taking any more lives and the answer is today.”)

For a copy of the report “‘Let them kill each other’ – Public Security in Jamaica’s inner cities”, please click [here](#)