

Public Statement

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Guyana: Legitimate debate around human rights issues must not be stifled

Amnesty International today urged the government of Guyana not to resort to inflammatory language that may undermine the right of freedom of expression and lead to further human rights violations.

“Many states describe as “terrorist” political motivations that they oppose,” the organisation said. “The recent branding of the opposition party and media as “terroristic” risks debasing legitimate public debate and encouraging violence against certain individuals,” the organization added, appealing for all in society to unite to condemn abuses by the security forces and work towards a society where the fundamental rights of all citizens are respected.

Amnesty International also reiterated its call for an immediate review of the activities of the Special Police Anti Crime Unit (the “Black Clothes” squad), citing numerous recent reports it had received of alleged extrajudicial killings in which members of the squad were implicated, including the killing of Lamar Blair last week.

“We recognise the duty of states under international human rights law to protect their populations from violent criminal acts. However crime fighting must not be undermined through the deliberate failure to adhere to international principles on the use of force and firearms. Human rights standards are not simply legal niceties. Rather they provide the framework through which all human rights may be protected.”

Background

On 16 April 2002, the Head of the Presidential Secretariat and Cabinet Secretary accused the opposition People’s National Congress Reform (PNC/R) party of pursuing “terroristic” policies and of increasing the risks faced by police by encouraging anti-police sentiment. The PNC/R had recently called for the disbanding of the Target Special Squad. The government also criticised the Trades Union Congress (TUC), urging them to condemn the “anti-Police campaign and terroristic behaviour of the PNC/R and its operatives”, after the TUC condemned alleged police excesses.

Amnesty International has long-standing concerns regarding the failure to tackle impunity for law enforcement officers who commit human rights violations in Guyana. Police reports that Lamar Blair opened fire on police in the course of an arrest attempt at his home contrasted with eye witness allegations that he was dragged from his home in front of his wife and two-year old child and shot in the head. Amnesty International has written to the government about this and other cases.

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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>