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Jamaica: the culture of violence must stop

In the wake of the recent outbursts of violence in Jamaica. Amnesty International today called on all Jamaicans to oppose the continuing tragedy of inter-community violence and human rights abuses by the security forces.

"For Jamaica to turn over a new leaf and move towards a more peaceful society, everyone -- from the most influential politician downwards -- must make a contribution to stopping the violence," the organization added.

Over the past few days, an estimated 21 people have been killed by members of the security forces, four members of which were also killed. Amnesty International has received numerous reports of police and army personnel firing indiscriminately or targeting unarmed civilians in the areas affected by the violence.

"These killings must be adequately investigated and political leaders and their followers must fully cooperate with all such investigations," Amnesty International said.

"Leaders of the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP) must make clear to their supporters and every other citizen that violence against their political opponents or the security forces is not acceptable."

"The culture of blame currently prevailing in Jamaica will not bring an end to the violence and human rights abuses we witness today, which are taking place in a highly politicised atmosphere. We believe that dialogue between the political parties is necessary to see calm restored and human rights protected," Amnesty International said.

The organization fully supports the efforts of the Private Sector Organization of Jamaica and others to bring the two main political parties together for talks on stopping the violence.

———Amnesty International acknowledges the difficulties and dangers faced by those responsible for the policing of areas controlled by armed individuals. However, the organization believes that -- even under these lethal conditions -- the police and army must operate under the codes of conduct governing law enforcement agencies, which stipulate that officers must deploy only the minimum amount of force necessary to protect themselves and those around them. Moreover, the deployment of army troops for the maintenance of public order must occur in a manner consistent with human rights protection.

"Human rights abuses committed by the security forces can only cause the situation to deteriorate and will undermine confidence in their ability to maintain peace and order and to protect the population," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International fears that the widespread violence recently witnessed in Kingston could become a regular occurrence in the lead up to elections that are to take place before the end of 2002.

"If such widespread violence, death and destruction are brought into the forthcoming elections, no matter which party wins, all of Jamaica will lose."

Background

Jamaica has a history of political violence, dating back to the 1970s and the formation of armed gangs with political affiliations. This year, violence with political undertones has been reported since the drive-by shooting in April 2001 of William "Willie Haggart" Moore, of Arnett Gardens (a PNP area), triggered violence in that and surrounding areas, leaving an estimated 41 people dead in the past two months.

On Saturday 7 July 2001 members of the Crime Management Unit raided Tivoli Gardens in West Kingston, a JLP garrison community, in an operation described as a raid for illegal arms stocks. In May 1997, Tivoli Gardens was the scene of similar disturbances. On that occasion, army and police officers were alleged to have discharged thousands of ammunition rounds indiscriminately over two days, following the shooting of a resident of the area by security forces. The disturbances occurred eight months before a general election, at a time of political tension.

The Crime Management Unit was established by the Prime Minister in September 2000. Amnesty International has received credible reports that the unit has been responsible for a number of alleged extra-judicial executions and acts of torture since its formation.

On 9 July 2001 the Prime Minister P.J. Patterson vested the army with police powers. Section 9 of the Defence Act states that the Jamaica Defence Force may be deployed in Jamaica "for the purpose of maintaining and securing public safety and public order". During the existence of the Suppression of Crimes Act -- emergency legislation which granted police and soldiers broad powers of arrest and detention -- there were numerous reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and ill-treatment. These were acknowledged by the current Minister of National Security and Justice at the time when the act was repealed.

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