

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Trinidad and Tobago: Death sentence for police officer convicted of murder

Amnesty International welcomes the recent conviction of a police officer for the murder of an 18 year-old man in January 2004. This is the first time since independence that a police officer has been convicted of murdering someone while on duty in Trinidad and Tobago. However, the organization is greatly alarmed that the officer has been sentenced to death.

Although the conviction is a positive step in the fight for justice in cases of police killings in Trinidad and Tobago, the organization strongly condemns the passing of a sentence of death. It would be a terrible irony if this conviction for a state killing were to be punished by what in effect would be another state killing.

Amnesty International urges the government of Trinidad and Tobago to commute this and all other current sentences of death and to declare a moratorium on executions as a first step towards total abolition of capital punishment.

On 22 March 2006, Police Constable Dave Burnett was found guilty of murdering Kevin Cato on 25 January 2004. Kevin Cato was shot dead by PC Burnett at a Carnival dance in Chaguaramas at around 4 o'clock in the morning. Ryan Solomon, 22, was also shot by the same officer but survived. According to eyewitnesses, an argument arose between Ryan Solomon and the police officer, who was on duty but not in uniform. According to Ryan Solomon, the police officer slapped him after he had bumped into him while dancing to music playing at the time. Solomon said he slapped the officer back who took out his gun and shot him and Kevin Cato. The police officer claimed he shot the men in self-defence but this was refuted by other eye witnesses. A few days after the killing, the officer from the Western Division was charged with murder. In February 2006, the case went to trial in the Fourth Criminal Court in Port of Spain.

Amnesty International has documented a number of apparently unlawful killings by police officers and deaths in police custody. Such cases have rarely been fully investigated allowing those responsible to benefit from impunity.

Kevin Cato's mother reportedly told the press that she was glad that justice had been done but did not want the death penalty to be carried out.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally and in all circumstances and calls for this sentence to be commuted. The organization has great sympathy with the victims of crime and recognizes the duty of governments to tackle problems of law and order but believes that the death penalty is by nature ineffective, arbitrary and does not deter crime.

Background Information

The last executions in Trinidad and Tobago took place in June and July 1999 when 10 men were hanged. In recent years, a surge in the crime rate has prompted the government to seek the resumption of executions.