

22 December 2000

AI Index ASA 36/001/2000 - News Service Nr. 242

Singapore: J B Jeyaretnam pushed towards bankruptcy, expulsion from parliament

Amnesty International today expressed concern at legal moves in Singapore which it fears may be a politically-motivated attempt to effect the bankruptcy, and therefore the automatic expulsion from parliament, of opposition Workers' Party leader J B Jeyaretnam.

"The Singaporean government has a history of using civil defamation suits to stifle political opposition. Such defamation suits place unreasonable restrictions on the right of Singaporeans to peacefully express their opinions and to participate freely in public life," Amnesty International said.

On 19th December 2000 a lower court awarded over S\$66,000 to J B Jeyaretnam after ruling in his favour in his claim against a lawyer who had failed to pay costs previously awarded against him.

Immediately following this, Minister of Foreign Affairs S Jayakumar and four others, including three ruling People's Action Party (PAP) members of parliament, applied to the courts to seize the monies awarded to J B Jeyaretnam on the grounds that a 1996 defamation award against the central council of the Workers' Party had not yet been fully paid off.

Amnesty International is concerned about the timing and intent of the application by the Foreign Minister and others. Following a period of over two years since half the award was paid, the plaintiffs have chosen this moment to press for full repayment, and only from J B Jeyaretnam and not other members of the Worker's Party central council who were also found liable.

It appears likely that the seizure of the S\$66,000 will prevent J B Jeyaretnam from paying in January 2001 the next of a series of financial installments required to forestall a bankruptcy petition lodged against him in November 2000. The petition was lodged by eight plaintiffs in a separate suit who were awarded damages for an article published in the Workers' Party newspaper in 1995. Although he had not written the article, as editor of the paper, Jeyaretnam was found to have defamed a PAP MP and nine other members of the Tamil community.

Amnesty International continues to urge that the filing and judicial examination of civil defamation suits and the settling of resulting awards be informed by respect for the principle of freedom of peaceful expression, and should not be used for political purposes.

For further information please see the following documents on www.amnesty.org

Singapore: JB Jeyaretnam - Defamation suits assault freedom of expression (AI Index: ASA 36/05/98) 22 July 1998.

Singapore: JB Jeyaretnam - the use of defamation suits for political purposes (AI Index: ASA 36/04/97) 15 October 1997.

Singapore: Amnesty International to monitor trial of opposition leader JB Jeyaretnam (AI Index ASA 36/02/97)15 August 1997.

\ENDS

public document

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>