

Trinidad executes nine in four days

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In early June Trinidad and Tobago carried out an unprecedented nine executions in the space of four days, culminating in the hanging of three convicted murderers June 7. With hundreds of people on death row in the English-speaking Caribbean nations, it is feared that a major new wave of executions has begun.

Trinidad officials ignored a petition submitted by Amnesty International, with the names of 130 prominent politicians, religious leaders and human rights advocates, urging a ban on executions.

The state executions were carried out following the exhaustion of a series of appeals heard in Trinidad and by the British Privy Council in London. All nine people executed were reputedly members of the drug gang lead by Dole Chaldee. The Chaldee gang members were convicted in 1996 of the murder of a family, after a son reportedly wanted to leave the gang.

The executions were the first in Trinidad since 1994. Jamaica, with 44 inmates on death row, is planning to carry out its first execution in 11 years.

Capital punishment in the region virtually ceased following a 1993 ruling by the Privy Council. The Council's ruling in a Jamaican case stipulated that delays of more than five years between convictions and executions constituted cruel and unusual punishment. As a result hundreds of inmates on death row had their sentences commuted to life in prison. To this day the Council remains the court of last resort in many of the Caribbean islands formerly ruled by the British, a vestige of the colonial past.

The 1993 ruling infuriated government officials in the Caribbean islands who launched a campaign to have capital punishment reinstated. Attorney General for Trinidad and Tobago Ramesh Maharaj and Jamaican Security Minister K.D. Knight became the main spokespersons for this reactionary movement.

In an ironic twist, Caribbean government officials have cynically portrayed the decision to carry out the

executions as an act of national defiance against "British aristocrats" in London.

Government officials in Trinidad also directed their fire at human rights organizations tied to the Organization of American States and the United Nations, and broke all ties to those groups. Officials were indignant that defense attorneys for death row inmates would turn to the human rights groups in an effort to win delays of executions, often pushing the appeals process beyond the five-year limit. Other Caribbean countries supporting Trinidad's policy are threatening to quit the human rights groups as well.

Justice ministers from more than a dozen countries met in Grenada recently to complete a draft plan for a Caribbean court to replace the Privy Council. Officials in Barbados are preparing plans to amend its constitution to overrule the Council's 1993 landmark decision. In St. Lucia, Prime Minister Dr. Kenny Anthony indicated that his government planned to hang death row prisoners who have exhausted their appeals.

The 12 English-speaking island republics in the region have a combined population of 5 million people, including 250 on death row—with more than 100 in Trinidad alone.

The retention of the death penalty on the books in more than a dozen Caribbean countries has clearly a great deal to do with the proximity and political and economic influence of the United States. Capital punishment is not carried out in any Western European or South American country at present, with the exception of Chile, another nation where American influence is particularly strong (and Guyana, which is essentially part of the Caribbean region).



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