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Institution: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
File Number(s): Report No. 45/98; Case 11.855
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Title/Style of Cause: Anthony Garcia v. Trinidad and Tobago
Doc. Type: Decision
Decided by: Chairman: Carlos Ayala Corao;
First Vice Chairman: Robert K. Goldman;
Second Vice Chairman: Jean Joseph Exume.
Commissioners: Alvaro Tirado Mejia, Claudio Grossman, Helio Bicudo,
Henry Forde.
Dated: 25 September 1998
Citation: Garcia v. Trinidad and Tobago, Case 11.855, Inter-Am. C.H.R., Report No.
45/98, OEA/Ser.L/V/II.102, doc. 6 rev. (1998)
Represented by: APPLICANT: Clive Woolf
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I. BACKGROUND

1. By letter dated December 16, 1997, Mr. Clive Woolf of the London firm S. Rutter & Co. (now Collyer & Bristow) presented a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (hereinafter "the Commission") against the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (hereinafter "the State" or "Trinidad") on behalf of Mr. Anthony Garcia, presently under sentence of death at the State Prison in Port of Spain. The petition stated that Mr. Garcia was convicted of the offence of murder of Mr. Cyril Roberts and sentenced to death on October 30, 1996.

2. Simultaneous with the presentation of the complaint, the Applicant requested the Commission to issue precautionary measures, pursuant to article 29(2) of its Regulations, and to seek a stay of execution pending the determination of the complaint by the Commission. On December 19, 1997, the Commission requested the State to stay Mr. Garcia's execution "until such time as the Commission has had the opportunity to consider this case and issue its decision." The Commission requested "an immediate consent to the above request."

3. The State of Trinidad and Tobago did not respond to this request for precautionary measures. The Commission regrets that the State party was not prepared to grant the precautionary measures requested under article 29(2) of its Regulations, and to guarantee that the Petitioner would not be executed while his case was under examination. In fact, however, as of September 25, 1998, the petitioner has not been executed. The Commission observes that it is not for the State party, but for the Commission, to decide whether or not a complaint is admissible. The Commission requests the State to cooperate fully with the Commission's examination of communications in the future.

II. PROCEEDINGS BEFORE THE COMMISSION

4. Mr. Garcia's appeal to the Court of Appeal of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago was dismissed on May 22, 1997. Mr. Garcia's appeal against his conviction for murder and the death sentence were dismissed by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on December 4, 1997.

5. The complaint alleges that the following articles of the American Convention were violated by the State of Trinidad and Tobago to the detriment of the Applicant: articles 8, 4 and 5 of the American Convention on Human Rights (hereinafter the "Convention" or "the American Convention"). Specifically, the petitioners allege serious violations as regards the right to legal representation in a capital case. The petition alleges, inter alia, that the petitioner "had no contact with legal counsel until 4 weeks after his arrest." In addition, he alleges that "he was inadequately consulted during the preliminary hearing and throughout his trial and as such he was given an inadequate opportunity to consult with counsel." The petitioner further submits that he has suffered a grave and substantial miscarriage of justice in that the jury was given an inaccurate direction on self-defense and as such these misdirections violated his rights to a fair trial. The petitioner also states that he had to wait two years and one month before the commencement of his trial and during that time he was forced to share a 6 foot by 9 foot cell with five other inmates, which he claims is cruel and unusual punishment.

6. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, at the request of the Government, held a meeting on February 20, 1998, during its 98th period of sessions, with Mr. Ralph Maraj, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Mr. Ramesh L. Maharaj, the Attorney General of that State. In his statement, the Attorney General argued that the "Commission has no power to challenge the implementation of a sentence of death imposed by a court of competent jurisdiction in Trinidad and Tobago." The argument of the State is as follows:

Under the Convention, the Commission has the power to make recommendations to the State Party, but in so far as those recommendations relate to a sentence imposed by the courts of the State Party it would be acting ultra vires if it attempted to alter by its recommendations the domestic law of the State in respect of sentencing. The Commission therefore has no power to challenge the implementation of a sentence of death imposed by a court of competent jurisdiction in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago mandates all arms of the State, including the Judicial arm, to uphold the law of Trinidad and Tobago. The State of Trinidad and Tobago therefore has a mandatory obligation to ensure that its Constitution and laws are not undermined, subverted or frustrated in their operation. It was for this reason that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, by its reservation entered when accepting the compulsory jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, stated that the Court can only have jurisdiction to the extent that it is consistent with the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. The Commission therefore does not have jurisdiction either by its acts or omissions to prevent in any way a sentence, authorized by the Constitution and laws of Trinidad and Tobago and pronounced by a court of competent jurisdiction, from being carried into effect. It is therefore open for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, whilst a petition is pending before the Commission, to carry out the sentence of

death once the time stipulated in accordance with the Constitution and laws of Trinidad and Tobago has expired. The Commission may recommend the award of compensation to a victim. It may recommend that the State Party correct those matters which gave rise to a substantive breach so that others do not suffer the same violation in future. However it is submitted that the Commission, either directly or by its recommendation, has no power to alter the lawful sentence imposed by a court of a State Party. (Emphasis added).

7. As a result of this meeting, the Commission decided to request provisional measures from the Court in the instant case and four others. The Commission, during its 99th special meeting in Caracas, Venezuela approved the text of this request. On May 22, 1998, the Commission formally requested provisional measures in the instant case and on behalf of four other persons condemned to death in Trinidad and Tobago.

8. An article published in the Trinidad Express on March 13, 1998 stated the Ministry of the Attorney General had issued a press release to the effect that "the six-month period in respect to their [Tony Briggs and Wenceslaus James] applications to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights expires on June 11, 1998, and after this date the state will decide what action it will take in respect to the two condemned men." [FN1] This article gave the impression that Briggs and James would be the first two prisoners to be hanged by the State of Trinidad and Tobago. The same article also stated that "[F]ollowing Briggs and James there are three other Death Row inmates listed to be executed soon after. They are Anthony Garcia and Anderson Noel and Christopher Bethel."

[FN1] Ucill Cambridge, "Sledgehammer killers first to go on Death Row," Trinidad Express, March 13, 1998.

9. On May 27, 1998, the President of the Inter-American Court granted Provisional Measures in the cases of James, Briggs, Noel, Garcia and Bethel, and decided to require the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago "to take all measures necessary to preserve the lives of Wenceslaus James, Anthony Briggs, Anderson Noel, Anthony Garcia and Christopher Bethel, so that the Court may examine the pertinence of the provisional measures requested by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights." On June 14, 1998, the Court, in plenary, ratified the President's action and ordered "Trinidad and Tobago to take all measures necessary to preserve the life and physical integrity of Wenceslaus James, Anthony Briggs, Anderson Noel, Anthony Garcia and Christopher Bethel, so as not to hinder the processing of their cases before the Inter-American system."

10. The State of Trinidad and Tobago responded to the petition by Note POL:6/16/2 Vol. 6 of March 6, 1998. In this Note, the State informed the Commission that the "Instructions Relating to Applications from Persons under Sentence of Death issued by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago on 13 October 1997, are deemed to apply to the communication of Anthony Garcia, Case No. 11.855." In addition, the State pointed out that:

... in order for any recommendation by the Commission to be considered by the Minister of National Security when advising his Excellency the President of the exercise of the prerogative of mercy, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago respectfully requests the Commission to submit its determination in respect of the communication within a period of six months from the date of the despatch of the response by the State Party.

In other words, the State requested that the Commission issue a decision on the merits in this case within a period of six months from March 6, 1998, or by September 6, 1998. According to the State, the decision of the Commission would be considered by the Minister of National Security when advising the President as to whether he should exercise the prerogative of mercy. Unlike other systems where the prerogative of mercy is considered part of the domestic process, in Trinidad and Tobago the international instance is used to inform the domestic process.

III. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

A. The Commission's Competence

11. Trinidad and Tobago is a State party to the American Convention, having ratified the treaty on May 28, 1991. The petition alleges violations of human rights set forth in the Convention which the Commission is competent to review.

B. Procedural Admissibility of the Petition

1. Exhaustion of Domestic Remedies

12. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago stated in its response dated March 6, 1998 that:

In the interests of expediency (...) notwithstanding the failure of the Applicant to first seek redress for his grievances by way of a Constitutional Motion before the domestic courts of Trinidad and Tobago, except as herein expressly provided, the State Party raises no challenge to the admissibility of this communication based on the exhaustion of domestic remedies rule (...).

13. The jurisprudence of the Inter-American Commission and Court supports the view that a remedy needs to be effective and capable of producing the result for which it was designed, and that it is not sufficient for the remedy simply to be available. (Velásquez Rodríguez, Preliminary Objections. Judgment of June 26, 1987, para. 88). For an indigent prisoner, who has exhausted all judicial appeals including recourse to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, to be expected to file a constitutional motion, the burden of proof lies with the State to show that this remedy is effective and capable of producing the result which would make it worthwhile for the prisoner to pursue. In the opinion of the Commission, the State did not meet the burden of proof in this case and consequently the Commission finds this case admissible.

2. Timely filing

14. The petition was presented within six months of the final ruling of the appeal on conviction and sentence pursuant to Article 46(1)(b) of the Convention. Mr. Garcia's appeal

against conviction and sentence was dismissed by the Court of Appeal of Trinidad and Tobago on May 22, 1997. His application for leave to appeal his conviction was dismissed by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, on December 4, 1997. The petition was filed before the Commission on December 16, 1997.

3. No duplication of other international procedures

15. The petition satisfies the requirements of Article 46(1)(c) in that it is not pending settlement in another international proceeding, nor does it duplicate a petition already examined and settled by the Commission or by another international governmental organization of which the State concerned is a member.

IV. CONCLUSION

16. The Commission finds that the petition is admissible having satisfied the requirements of article 46 of the American Convention.

17. Taking the foregoing considerations into account,

THE INTER-AMERICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS,

DECIDES:

1. To declare the present case admissible.
2. To place itself at the disposal of the parties with a view to seeking a friendly settlement of the matter based on the respect for human rights, as recognized in the American Convention.
3. To maintain in effect the provisional measures issued by the Court on June 14, 1998, until the Commission issues a decision on the merits of the petition.
4. To make public this report and to publish it in its Annual Report to the OAS General Assembly.

Done and signed at the headquarters of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in the city of Washington, D.C., on the 25 day of the month of September in the year 1998. (Signed): Carlos Ayala Corao, Chairman; Robert K. Goldman, First Vice Chairman; Jean Joseph Exumé, Second Vice Chairman; Commissioners Alvaro Tirado Mejía, Claudio Grossman, Hélio Bicudo and Henry Forde.