

**NEWS**

US Weighs Aid Cut to Guyana Over Death Squad Charges

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The State Department Tuesday raised the prospect of a cut in U.S. aid to Guyana after the president of the South American country moved to reinstate a cabinet official allegedly tied to extra-judicial killings.

The State Department is expressing deep concern about the reinstatement of former Guyanese Home Minister Ronald Gajraj, the country's main law enforcement official. It is holding out the possibility of cuts in U.S. aid to Guyana because of what are described here as significant unanswered questions about his alleged links to a government-connected death squad.

Mr. Gajraj was placed on leave of last year amid charges he was involved with a hit squad that originated as a vigilante response to a crime wave in the country three years ago.

A government-appointed commission of inquiry reported to President Bharrat Jagdeo earlier this month that while it found serious irregularities in Mr. Gajraj's conduct, there was no credible evidence linking him to extra-judicial killings.

The president announced last week that Mr. Gajraj will be reinstated.

The decision has been criticized by Guyanese opposition politicians who say the findings of the commission were totally unacceptable and provocative.

In a written statement, State Department Spokesman Richard Boucher said the United States is deeply concerned about the decision to reinstate Mr. Gajraj, and that significant questions remain unanswered about his involvement in serious criminal activities.

Mr. Boucher said the United States and Guyana enjoy close, cordial relations and share an important bilateral agenda. But he said Mr. Gajraj's return to a key ministry, with direct control over law enforcement, undermines the rule of law in Guyana.

The spokesman said U.S. officials will be looking at the range of assistance being provided to Guyana, especially in the area of governance and law enforcement, to protect the integrity of the bilateral agenda.

U.S. aid to Guyana last year totaled about \$8.5 million. Most of it is focused on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention but about one million dollars was earmarked for governance and related programs.

In its most recent global human rights report, in late February, the State Department said Guyana generally respected the human rights of its citizens. But it cited continuing charges by the news media and human rights groups that police were involved in unlawful killings.

It said some killings were attributed to an organized hit squad, including that of a businessman shot and killed last June after saying that he had been a member of a death squad directed by Mr. Gajraj.

Mr. Gajraj himself denies any role in extra-judicial killings and says all actions he took as Home Minister were within the confines of the law.