

Protecting human rights

VS Naipaul puts some poignant words into the mouth of “Mr Biswas”, who had feared living: “without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth, to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated.”

On Tuesday, we attended the funeral of Akenton Shawn St Clair. Shawn was not unknown, he had his fleeting glory of being “Panday’s son”.

He was a creative young man who had dreams and hopes, and was willing, despite the odds, to struggle towards these.

Young and old die in accidents. We cannot protect our young people from tragedy, but the poignancy of Shawn’s early death is rendered so much more acutely painful by the fact that he was crushed by a garbage truck at the La Basse, one of his places of employment.

Were it not for his association with Mr. Panday, his funeral would not have been the public spectacle it was. His death would simply have merited a few anonymous lines, e.g. “Youth/scavenger crushed by garbage truck”.

The fate of yet another “unnecessary and unaccommodated” person.

This term began with the shooting dead of a mentally ill woman by a policeman and, as it ends, we face the situation in the San Fernando hospital where a ventilator was removed from a patient without any consultation with his family.

The withdrawal of the ventilator may indeed have been appropriate, but the circumstances surrounding it raise many troubling questions. Why do we have technology without the accompanying ethical guidelines? Who is accommodated by the technologies?

In situations of scarcity, who is deemed necessary?

December 10 marked the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document is essentially a commitment across borders of race, culture and religion to a world where there are no “unnecessary or unaccommodated” people, where all can lay claim to their portion of the Earth.

May the words of “Mr Biswas” and the memory of Akenton Shawn St Clair renew within each of us a commitment to the protection of human rights.