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1,526 executed in 2002

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(Geneva) During 2002 over 1,526 people were executed in 31 countries, Amnesty International said today.

Releasing its statistics for the number of worldwide executions carried out during 2002, Amnesty International called on the UN Commission on Human Rights to take strong action against the death penalty at its annual session, currently sitting in Geneva, and to establish a universal moratorium on executions.

"The Commission on Human Rights will hopefully soon pass another strong resolution reiterating its call for an immediate worldwide moratorium on executions and urging states to respect international standards, including the ban on executing child offenders."

"The UN should take the lead and take firm and positive measures to protect those facing the death penalty."

Amnesty International stressed that the figures released today only include cases known to the organization. "It is impossible to give a complete total because many countries deliberately keep the true numbers of those executed secret, belying the supposed deterrent value of the death penalty," the human rights organization said.

Amnesty International also recorded over 3,248 people who were sentenced to death in 67 countries during 2002.

"Many cases were in blatant violation of international standards on the application of the death penalty," Amnesty International said.

"Prisoners were sentenced to death following unfair trials. There were executions of child offenders -- people convicted of crimes committed when they were under the age of 18." Three such executions were recorded in 2002 - all in the USA.

Amnesty International recorded 1,060 executions in China and 113 executions in Iran, but the true number was believed to be much higher in both countries. Seventy-one people were executed in the USA, up from 66 in 2001.

"The figures for China, Iran and the USA accounted for 81 per cent of all known executions in 2002," Amnesty International said.

"Yet there has also been progress towards abolition. By the end of the year, 111 countries had abolished the death penalty in law or practice."

During 2002, Cyprus and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (now Serbia and Montenegro) abolished the death penalty for all offences. Turkey abolished the death penalty in practice.

Amnesty International welcomed the decision by the President of Tanzania in April 2002 to commute the death sentences of 100 people convicted of murder, and the commutation of 17 death sentences in Saudi Arabia in December.

More recently, Governor George Ryan of the US state of Illinois decided, when leaving office in January 2003, to commute the sentences of all 167 prisoners on the state's death row. Suspension of executions were announced in Guatemala, the Philippines and the US state of Maryland. In Kyrgyzstan, the President announced in January 2003 that the country's moratorium in executions would be extended for another year.

Additionally, during 2002 Djibouti, Lithuania and South Africa ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) -- a treaty providing for the total abolition of the death penalty -- bringing the number of state parties to the Second Optional Protocol to 49.

In Europe, a new treaty providing for the total abolition of the death penalty with no exceptions was adopted and opened for signature. By the end of the year five countries had ratified Protocol No. 13 to the European Convention on Human Rights, and 34 other countries had signed it.

Another positive development in 2002 was the formation of the World Coalition against the Death Penalty, comprising trade unions, bar associations, local and regional governments and human rights organizations. This new coalition is working for the universal abolition of capital punishment. Amnesty International has been joined by the other members of the Coalition in appealing for action by the UN Commission on Human Rights.

"The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and a violation of the right to life," Amnesty International said.

"It is time to get rid of this barbaric punishment forever."

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