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World: Child executions on the way out

The US Supreme Court has the opportunity to consign the execution of child offenders to history and bring the USA into line with the vast majority of countries that have already done so, said Amnesty International today as it published a new report on the issue.

The US Supreme Court will hear oral arguments on 13 October. Its decision on the constitutionality of the death penalty against 16 and 17-year-old offenders is expected in the first half of 2005.

"Such executions violate international law. The international consensus against putting people to death for crimes committed when they were children reflects the widespread recognition of the capacity of young people for growth and change," said Amnesty International.

Since 2003, six people were executed in China, Iran and the USA, for crimes committed when they were children. Other convicted child offenders remain under sentence of death in Pakistan, the Philippines and Sudan.

"The life of a child should never be written off, whatever he or she has done. The guiding principle must be to maximize the child offender's potential for eventual successful reintegration into society. Execution is the ultimate denial of this principle," said Amnesty International.

Scott Allen Hain was executed in the USA on 3 April 2003 for a crime committed when he was only 17. Since then several executions of child offenders have been stayed pending the outcome of the Supreme Court deliberations.

The USA is the only country which openly acknowledges executing child offenders and claims for itself the right to do so under international law.

In China, although by law no one should be executed for a crime committed when they were under 18, children have continued to be executed because the courts apparently do not take sufficient care to determine their age.

Gao Pan, was executed on 8 March 2004 for a crime committed on 9 August 2001, possibly before he was 18 years old. Conflicting information on official documents and the use of different calendar

systems had lead to confusion over his true age.

In an attempt to prove that Gao was 18 years old at the time of the crime, the state prosecutor provided a household registration document signed by Gao's grandfather, which on further examination was reportedly proven false.

Hebei Province High People's Court rejected 32 items of evidence provided by Gao's lawyer supporting the claim that he was not yet 18 years old at the time of the crime. The court also rejected a request made by Gao's family to carry out a medical check which might have helped to clarify his age.

In Iran 16-year-old Ateqeh Rajabi, was publicly hanged on 15 August 2004 on a street in the city centre of Neka, northern Iranian province of Mazandaran for "acts incompatible with chastity".

Ateqeh Rajabi was sentenced to death three month earlier. During her trial she was not allowed legal representation and the judge severely criticized her dress, harshly reprimanding her. It is alleged that Ateqeh Rajabi was mentally ill both at the time of her crime and during her trial proceedings.

Although Ateqeh Rajabi's national identity card stated that she was 16 years old, the Mazandaran Judiciary announced at her execution that her age was 22.

For a copy of the report: "Stop Child Executions! Ending the death penalty for child offenders", please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGACT500152004>

For more information on Amnesty International's campaign against child executions, please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/deathpenalty-children-eng>

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