

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ACT 50/011/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 072
5 April 2005

Embargo Date: 5 April 2005 00:01 GMT

Death Penalty: 3,797 executed in 2004

During 2004, more than 3,797 people were executed in 25 countries and at least 7,395 were sentenced to death in 64 countries, said Amnesty International today.

Releasing its annual worldwide statistics on the use of capital punishment, Amnesty International called on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, currently meeting in Geneva, to condemn the death penalty as a violation of fundamental human rights.

"The figures released today are sadly only the tip of the iceberg. The true picture is hard to uncover as many countries continue to execute people secretly -- contravening United Nations standards calling for disclosure of information on capital punishment," said Amnesty International.

A few countries accounted for the majority of executions carried out during 2004. China executed at least 3,400 people, but sources inside the country have estimated the number to be near 10,000.

Iran executed at least 159, and Viet Nam at least 64. There were 59 executions in the USA, down from 65 in 2003.

"Despite the worldwide trend towards abolition, these figures highlight the ongoing need for concerted action by the international community to consign the death penalty to history."

"It is worrying that the vast majority of those executed in the world did not have fair trials. Many were convicted on the basis of 'evidence' extracted under torture."

In 2004, Ryan Matthews became the 115th prisoner in the USA since 1973 to be released from death row on the grounds of innocence. He had been sentenced to death in Louisiana in 1999 for a murder committed when he was 17 years old. His death sentence was overturned in April 2004 after an appeal judge found that the prosecution had suppressed evidence at the trial, and on the basis of DNA evidence that pointed to another person as being the murderer.

While executions continued, the abolition of capital punishment advanced. Five countries abolished the death penalty for all crimes in 2004 - Bhutan, Greece, Samoa, Senegal and Turkey. At year end, 120 countries had abolished the death penalty in law or practice.

Several countries, while retaining the death penalty in law, observed moratoria on executions. A law on "the suspension of the application of the death penalty" was signed into force in July in Tajikistan, and in January this year President Aksar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan announced that a moratorium on executions, which had been in place since 1998, would be extended for another year. Other countries with moratoria on executions included Malawi and South Korea.

Amnesty International welcomed the United States Supreme Court ruling in March this year declaring unconstitutional the use of the death penalty against child offenders -- people under 18 at the time of the crime. With this decision all countries have now formally rejected the application of the death penalty to child offenders. However, Amnesty International remains concerned that child offenders continued to be executed in a few other countries. Iran executed at least three child offenders in 2004, violating its obligations as party to international treaties which preclude the practice. China executed a young man despite concerns that he may have been a juvenile when he committed a capital crime. His execution was carried out while his lawyer and family were still petitioning the Supreme People's Court to review his case. Another child offender was executed in Iran in January this year.

"It is high time the Commission affirms clearly that the imposition of the death penalty on those aged under 18 at the time of the commission of the offence is contrary to customary international law."

Amnesty International also welcomed the decisions of several countries to adopt constitutional provisions precluding the death penalty. In a survey of constitutional measures released today, Amnesty International reported that Turkey prohibited the death penalty in its constitution in 2004, as did Belgium in February this year. Other countries with recently enacted constitutional prohibitions of the death penalty include Ireland and Turkmenistan.

"These are important advances that the Commission should welcome and encourage. "

"The case of Ryan Mathews and scores of others sentenced to death in the USA for crimes they did not commit demonstrate that no judicial system is infallible. However sophisticated the system, the death penalty will always carry with it the risk of lethal error" Amnesty International said.

For a full copy of "The death penalty worldwide: developments in 2004", please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGA050012005>

For more information on Amnesty International's work against the death penalty, please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/deathpenalty-index-eng>

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