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World Day Against the Death Penalty: "War on Terror" is no justification for executions

The "War on Terror" must not be used to justify reversing progress on the abolition of the death penalty, Amnesty International said as more than 90 countries prepared to mark the World Day against the Death Penalty this Sunday.

The warning came from the Secretary General of Amnesty International Irene Khan in a speech to the Second World Congress against the Death Penalty in Montreal this week, organised by the World Coalition against the Death Penalty.

"The death penalty is the ultimate, irreversible denial of human rights, because it contravenes the essence of human values. It is often applied in a discriminatory manner, follows unfair trials, or is applied for political reasons. It is not a unique deterrent against crime, and is an irreversible error when there is miscarriage of justice," said Irene Khan.

Over half the countries of the world, 118, have now abolished the death penalty in law or practice, Turkey being the latest. In Europe and Central Asia, only Belarus and Uzbekistan are known to carry out executions while all but five states (China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Pakistan and USA) have banned the execution of children. However, there have also been setbacks.

In April this year, Afghanistan carried out its first execution since the establishment of the interim government in December 2001 and in Iraq, one of the first acts of the interim government was to reinstate the death penalty for murder.

"A heightened concern for security and crime control continue to be drivers for the death penalty in many countries of the world", said Irene Khan. "Public opinion in many parts of the world still feels that the death penalty is needed to deter crime or 'terrorism'. We must build greater public support for abolition. But we must also ask governments to show leadership on this issue".

"These are tough times for human rights and we must be determined in our response to hold up the values in which we believe. Human rights are for the best of us and the worst of us. Human rights are for the guilty as much as the innocent. That is why the death penalty must be abolished world-wide," said Irene Khan.

Background

A Lawyers Declaration Against the Implementation of the Death Penalty on Child Offenders in the USA is being presented to the Second World Congress by Amnesty International. The Declaration has been signed by 798 lawyers, including almost 100 from the USA. It calls on the legislatures of US states whose laws still allow the execution of child offenders to raise the minimum age to 18.

During this World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October, Amnesty International sections around the world will promote two of the organisations current campaigns: *Stop Child Executions!* and *Towards a Central Asia free from executions*. Amnesty International members will hold public events, distribute information packs and leaflets as well as collect signatures from the public on specific appeals.

In 1977, when Amnesty International organised its first International Conference on the Death Penalty in Stockholm, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty for all crimes. Today, five times that figure, 80 countries have now abolished the death penalty for all crimes, 15 countries have abolished it for all but exceptional crimes, and another 23 have retain the death penalty in law but have not carried out executions for the past ten years or have made an international commitment not to use the death penalty.

International standards prohibit the execution of child offenders -- people who were under 18 years old at the time of the crime. These standards include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the American Convention on Human Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. This prohibition is now so widely accepted as to constitute a principle of customary international law. The relevant standards are respected by the overwhelming majority of the 80 countries which still retain and use the death penalty.

The World Coalition against the Death Penalty was founded in 2002 and is composed of human rights and legal organizations in the field of human rights, and local authorities who have joined forces to abolish the death penalty around the world. The Coalition's objectives are to stimulate public debate and strengthen opposition to the death penalty; apply pressure on retentionist states to cease executions and abolish the death penalty; establish contacts with other local organizations and affiliate them to the World Coalition; and to promote events at the global level, such as the World Day.

For a copy of the speech by the Secretary General of Amnesty International Irene Khan to the Second World Congress against the Death Penalty please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engact500172004>

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