

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 17/049/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 244
1 October 2004

China: School trips to watch death sentences

In a bizarre holiday celebration several hundred schoolchildren were taken to watch six men being sentenced to death at a public sentencing rally, according to a Chinese internet report.

"The Chinese government regularly 'celebrates' national holidays by executing large numbers of criminals," said Ingrid Massage, Asia director at Amnesty International. "This year, the Mid-Autumn Festival falls in the same week as China's National Day on Friday 1 October and there has been a surge of executions."

The schoolchildren were part of an audience of 2,500 people. Held in a gymnasium in Changsha, capital of central Hunan province, the sentencing rally was timed to coincide with the Mid-Autumn Festival on 27 September. The six men were then taken to an execution ground and shot, according to the report on the 'Tom' web portal.

Pictured wearing their school uniforms, the children are described as elementary and middle school students, between the ages of six and seventeen. They heard the details of the convicts' crimes read out in public -- including murder, assault and kidnapping -- and then witnessed the criminals being sentenced to death.

Taking children out of school to attend sentencing rallies appears to contravene the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by China in 1992. This states that education should be directed at the "development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".

The six men in Hunan are among at least 100 people executed in recent days in China.

Both in law and practice, China's criminal justice system does not currently offer fair trials under international legal standards. This is particularly alarming in criminal cases where the death penalty is passed. Confessions may be extorted through torture, access to lawyers is limited and the appeal system is fractured and decentralised. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all circumstances and is calling on China to halt all executions immediately with a view to abolishing the death penalty in law.

To see the 'Tom' report, go to: <http://news.tom.com/1002/20040928-1366379.html>

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