

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ACT 50/009/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 094
20 April 2006

Embargo Date: 20 April 2006 01:00 GMT

Death Penalty: 20,000 on death row across the world

Amnesty International today revealed that over 20,000 people on death row across the world are waiting to be killed by their own governments.

In its latest annual analysis on the use of the death penalty worldwide, Amnesty International also disclosed that at least 2,148 people were executed during 2005 in 22 countries -- 94 percent in China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the USA alone. 5,186 people were sentenced to death in 53 countries during 2005.

The organization cautioned that these figures are approximate because of the secrecy surrounding the death penalty. Many governments, like China, refuse to publish full official statistics on executions while Viet Nam has even classified statistics and reporting on the death penalty as a 'state secret'.

"Figures around the death penalty are truly disturbing: 20,000 people are counting down to the day when the state will take their life. 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 can be an irreversible error when there is miscarriage of justice," said Irene Khan, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

"The death penalty is not a unique deterrent against crime. Instead of relying on the illusion of control given by the death penalty, governments must focus on developing effective measures against crime."

Despite the shocking figures on the death penalty, the trend towards abolition continues to grow: the number of countries carrying out executions halved in the last 20 years and has dropped for the fourth consecutive year. Mexico and Liberia are the two most recent examples of countries that have abolished the death penalty.

"As the world continues to turn away from the use of the death penalty, it is a glaring anomaly that China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the USA stand out for their extreme use of this form of punishment as the 'top' executioners in the world," said Ms Khan.

In China -- the country that accounts for almost 80% of all executions -- a person can be sentenced and executed for as many as 68 crimes, including non-violent crimes such as tax fraud, embezzlement and drug offences.

In Saudi Arabia, people have been taken from their prison cells and executed without knowing that a death sentence has been passed against them. Others have been tried and sentenced to death in a language they didn't speak or read.

In the US, two men were released from death row in 2005 after evidence of their innocence emerged.

Iran was the only country known to Amnesty International to have executed juvenile offenders in 2005. Iran executed at least eight people in 2005 for crimes committed when they were children, including two who were still under the age of 18 at the time of their execution. The USA banned the execution of juvenile offenders in March 2005 having previously been a "world leader" in the practice.

"The fact that the USA, which was the world's main perpetrator for the execution of juvenile offenders, has now ended the practice should be a clear message to those remaining countries that execute children that this barbaric practice must stop. The US Supreme Court decision banning the execution of juvenile offenders is one of the final milestones on the road to a remarkable human rights achievement: the global abolition of death penalty for children" said Ms Khan.

In some countries, the use of the death penalty may be dangerously mixed with economic interests. In China, many worry that the high profits behind organ transplants from those executed might act as an incentive to maintain the death penalty.

In many countries, inhumane procedures often exacerbate the inherent cruelty of being on death row. For example, in Belarus and Uzbekistan neither death row prisoners nor their relatives are informed of the date of the execution in advance, denying them a last chance to say goodbye. The body of the prisoner is not given to relatives for burial and they are not informed of the place of burial.

Amnesty International's report also highlights the deadly consequences of unfair trials.

In Japan, a number of people have been sentenced to death after ill-treatment and the extraction of forced "confessions" for crimes they did not commit.

The flawed criminal justice systems in Uzbekistan and Belarus provides a fertile ground for judicial error. Executions in Uzbekistan often follow credible allegations of unfair trials, torture and ill-treatment, often to extract "confessions".

"The momentum against the death penalty has become unstoppable. In 1977, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty for all crimes. By 2005, that figure had risen to 86. Amnesty International's campaign will continue until every death sentence is commuted and capital punishment abolished," declared Ms Khan.

"Human rights are for the guilty as well as the innocent, the best of us and the worst of us. That is why the death penalty must be abolished worldwide."

Background information

Amnesty International's death penalty statistics cover the period between January and December 2005.

Data available to Amnesty International pointed to around 1,770 executions reported as being carried out in China during 2005. However, the real figure is undoubtedly much higher. A Chinese legal expert was recently quoted as stating the true figure for executions at approximately 8,000.

Iran executed at least 94 people, Saudi Arabia at least 86. There were 60 executions in the US.

For a copy of Amnesty International's Death Penalty statistics 2005, please see: World developments - <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGACTION500052006>

Facts and Figures - <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGACT500062006>

Death sentences and executions - <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENG500022006>

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