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Amnesty International addresses the Russian Parliament to urge abolition of the death penalty

In an Open Letter today, International Human Rights Day, Amnesty International is urging members of the Russian State Duma (parliament) to take steps towards fully abolishing the death penalty. In 1977 Nobel Peace Laureate Andrey Sakharov wrote in a letter to Amnesty International: "I regard the death penalty as a savage and immoral institution which undermines the ethical and legal foundations of a society". He continued "I reject the notion that the death penalty has any deterrent effect whatsoever on potential criminals, I am convinced that the contrary is true, savagery only begets savagery".

Amnesty International (AI) is launching today three days of campaigning in the Russian Federation to urge abolition of the death penalty. An AI delegation is visiting Moscow to campaign for abolition during several events in the Russian State Duma as well as at the Moscow International Human Rights Film Festival "Stalker". AI is joined in these activities by three well known US abolitionist activists and Russian non-governmental organizations.

Sister Helen Prejean's book Dead Man Walking, based on her experience working with death row inmates and relatives of murder victims, was made into the Oscar-winning film, of the same name. On 12 December the film will be presented by Amnesty International as part of the film festival.

Bud Welch tragically lost his 23-year old daughter, Julie, in the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma. He has since been actively campaigning against the death penalty, including against the execution of Timothy McVeigh, the perpetrator of that crime.

Denise LeBoeuf is a leading death row lawyer and human rights activist. She has defended people against capital crimes at trial and on appeal in many courts, including the United States Supreme Court.

"To die can be a matter of chance, the way that some of those convicted end up on death row and some not can be haphazard and above all there is a chance that a mistake can be made." AI said in the Open Letter to members of the Russian Duma.

Sergey Mikhailov from Archangelsk Region of the Russian Federation was sentenced to death in 1995 for rape and murder of a 10 year-old girl. Allegedly he had been tortured and ill-treated in detention in order to extract a confession. In 1996 another man was found guilty for the same crime. An investigation into the newly discovered evidence was opened, and concluded in July 1997 that Sergey Mikhailov had been wrongly accused and sentenced. Amnesty International and local human rights organizations called for an investigation into the allegations that his confession had been obtained under duress. In July 2001 Sergey Mikhailov was finally released. Without the 1999 moratorium on executions in Russia, Sergey Mikhailov would have not been alive today.

In the same month of Sergey Mikhailov's release, AI welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin's position against Russia reinstating the death penalty. President Putin was quoted as saying: "The state should not assume the right which only the Almighty has to take a human life".

AI believes that it is now time for the Russian Federation to join the family of abolitionist countries – to show an example in the region, and to display political wisdom and world leadership to fellow members of the UN Security Council, such as the United States, by fully abolishing the death penalty in national law.

"It is especially important in today's world, in the aftermath of September 11 tragedy in New York, that the leading United Nation's governments, like the US and the Russian, show a moral leadership in the strife for justice in the face of calls for revenge," AI stated.

AI urges the Russian State Duma to ratify protocol No.6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, amend its national legislation, particularly the Russian Criminal Code, to abolish capital punishment for all crimes.

For comments, as well as to request interviews with Sister Helen Prejean, Bud Welch and Denise LeBoeuf, please contact Mariana Katzarova, the AI researcher on the Russian Federation, in Moscow at mobile phone: 7 901 903 1865.

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