

EXTERNAL

25 March 1993

@Ruben Melkonjan

£Republic of Estonia

Amnesty International is concerned that Ruben Melkonjan, a 20-year-old ethnic Armenian, has been sentenced to death by Tallinn City Court on 4 March 1993. He has been convicted of the murder of a 17-year-old Azerbaydzhani and his 19-year-old Russian girlfriend near Tallinn in August 1991. His two accomplices received prison sentences.

Ruben Melkonjan has the right to appeal to the Supreme Court. If it decides to uphold the death sentence, then Ruben Melkonjan's final recourse will be to petition the President of Estonia for clemency.

Background information about the death penalty in Estonia

The death penalty is retained in Estonia for three crimes: aggravated murder, assassination and acts of terrorism. Five people, in addition to Ruben Melkonjan, are known to have been sentenced to death since July 1988, all for the crime of premeditated murder under aggravated circumstances. Three people have been granted clemency and one person - Rein Oruste - was executed. Amnesty International is appealing for the commutation of the other death sentence still pending - that of Vladimir Botchko.

Since 5 October 1992 petitions for clemency are heard by the President of the Republic of Estonia. The President receives recommendations on whether the death sentence should be commuted from the Clemency Commission, composed of four members of the Estonian Parliament, the Chairman of the Supreme Court, the Procurator General and the Minister of Justice.

In June 1992 a newly revised criminal code entered into force. This new code represents only the first step in a long process which is intended to lead eventually to the thorough overhaul of criminal legislation. The second stage of the process could, however, last several years.

During a recent visit to Estonia Amnesty International was able, for the first time, to obtain some information about the procedures for executions in Estonia. According to the Director of Tallinn Prison, a person condemned to death only learns whether his petition for clemency has been rejected when he is collected from his cell and taken away to be executed. Further information regarding the manner of execution and the persons present during it were not divulged on grounds of secrecy.

Amnesty International has consistently pressed the Estonian authorities to review the use of the death penalty as a step towards its abolition and to impose a moratorium on death sentences and executions until an exhaustive review of the death penalty has taken place.