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Afghanistan: President Karzai must immediately stop imminent executions

Afghanistan's president Hamid Karzai should immediately stop the imminent execution of 16 inmates on death row, Amnesty International said today.

President Karzai's approval of the executions on Monday 19 November, according to a government spokesperson, is the last step in the formal process, under Afghan law.

"We urge President Karzai to halt these executions immediately. The sheer number of people who could be killed by the state is a particularly shocking use of what is the ultimate cruel and inhuman form of punishment," said Polly Truscott, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director.

It is not clear when the executions will take place, but in the past executions have been carried out very soon after presidential approval.

"The death penalty should never be used to achieve political gain or popularity. President Karzai would earn much higher credibility if he made greater effort to ensure the rule of law in Afghanistan where detainees are frequently tortured, the judiciary has little independence and serious human rights violations and crimes often go unpunished," said Truscott.

Some 200 prisoners are reportedly on death row in Afghanistan where death sentences continue to be imposed.

"There are still serious questions about the efficiency and impartiality of the Afghan justice system that have to be addressed immediately," said Truscott.

Afghanistan's continued use of capital punishment is in stark contrast to the trend – both globally and in Asia – towards an end to the use of the death penalty.

The UN General Assembly (GA) has adopted three resolutions since 2007 – with a continuously increasing majority – calling for a global moratorium on using the death penalty.

Last night, on 19 November, Afghanistan abstained during a GA committee vote on the draft text for a fourth resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. This text will be put to a final GA vote at a plenary session in December 2012.

On the regional level, other Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are taking small but significant steps aimed at reducing the use of the death penalty.

"Positive steps elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, make Karzai's approval of a new round of executions even more disappointing," said Truscott.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception, regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime, or the method used by the state to carry out the execution. The death penalty violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.