

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Philippines: Largest ever commutation of death sentences

Amnesty International warmly welcomes what it believes to be the largest ever commutation of death sentences, as announced by President Arroyo on 15 April.

The move will affect at least 1,230 prisoners who have been sentenced to death since 1994. At least 290 prisoners have had their sentences confirmed on appeal and the policy change will benefit these people first of all.

The Philippines has taken another important step in the long road towards abolition, said Amnesty International. The organization now urges President Arroyo to follow through on earlier pledges to prioritize legislation that is currently before Congress which, if given the support of Senators and Representatives from across the political spectrum, could lead to the complete abolition of the death penalty in the Philippines. The organization appeals to Congress to seize this historic opportunity and abolish the death penalty once and for all.

Amnesty International is tomorrow also releasing its global statistics on the death penalty. Over 40 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes since 1990 and now 123 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or in practice.

By commuting these death sentences President Arroyo is signalling the end of the death penalty in the Philippines and is joining other governments around the world in recognizing the brutality of the sentence, said Amnesty International.

AI opposes the death penalty worldwide in all cases without exception as a violation of one of the most fundamental of human rights: the right to life. The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. There is no escaping the risk of error that can lead to the execution of an innocent person. Scientific studies have consistently failed to find convincing evidence that the death penalty deters crime more effectively than other punishments.

Moreover, in practice the death penalty is applied in an arbitrary, selective way that falls disproportionately on the disadvantaged, the ill-educated and those unable to afford competent legal defence; and there is an ever-present risk of trial errors leading to the irrevocable judicial murder of the innocent. In the Philippines, Amnesty International is particularly concerned that the risk of judicial errors may sharply increase due to credible reports of patterns of ill-treatment and torture of criminal suspects in pre-trial detention by law enforcement officials in order to coerce confessions.

Background

In 1987 the Philippines set an historic precedent by becoming the first Asian country in modern times to

abolish the death penalty for all crimes. However, the death penalty was reintroduced in the Philippines in late 1993 for a total of 46 different offences. Executions resumed in 1999 after a period of 23 years. Former President Estrada in 2000 announced a moratorium on executions, which President Arroyo has continued, in practice, into her presidency.

Following President Arroyo's re-election in May and inauguration in July 2004, there were reports that executions would again resume. However the President indicated she would grant a series of reprieves to those facing imminent execution. Bills calling for the repeal of the death penalty law have since been filed and several have been incorporated in House Bill 4826, which currently is under consideration in Congress.