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SOUTH AFRICA: IN THE WAKE OF HISTORIC COURT RULING, GOVERNMENT SHOULD REMOVE DEATH PENALTY FROM STATUTE BOOKS

A huge step forward of worldwide significance has been taken in South Africa with today's Constitutional Court ruling that the death penalty is contrary to the country's new constitution.

"We are celebrating a victory today with this ruling, which advances the cause of human rights in Africa and worldwide," Amnesty International said. "This historic court ruling puts Africa and South Africa in the forefront of the international movement to abolish the death penalty."

In the wake of the historic court ruling, Amnesty International today appealed to the government to take the next step and remove the death penalty from the country's statute books, bringing South Africa's laws into line with the ruling.

The Constitutional Court hearing on the death penalty took place in February 1995. Amnesty International sent a representative, international death penalty expert William Schabas, to attend the hearing. Mr Schabas is a professor of law at the Université du Québec in Montreal, Canada.

For more than two decades, Amnesty International has been campaigning against the death penalty in South Africa.

Until the use of the death penalty was suspended in February 1990, South Africa had one of the highest rates of judicial executions in the world. The previous government achieved international notoriety by executing some 1,217 people between 1980 and 1989, including political prisoners who were executed despite appeals from political leaders and ordinary people all over the world.

Currently, there are some 453 prisoners who are under sentence of death in South Africa.

By abolishing the death penalty, South Africa would join the ranks of the 55 countries which have rejected this cruel and outmoded punishment for all crimes, including seven African countries (Angola, Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Namibia, Sao Tomé and Príncipe). Nearly half of all countries in the world (96 countries) have abolished the death penalty in law or practice, Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International said it hopes that the South Africa ruling will be heeded by countries which still use the death penalty, or are considering re-introducing it.

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In Côte d'Ivoire, where no one has been executed since the country achieved independence in 1960, a bill introducing public executions for armed robbery is now before a committee of the National Assembly. In an open letter, Amnesty International has urged Côte d'Ivoire President Henri Konan Bédié to press for the withdrawal of the bill.

In 1994, at least 2,331 prisoners were executed in 37 countries worldwide, Amnesty International said. Eighty-seven percent of all known executions were carried out in just three countries: China (1,791), Iran (139), and Nigeria (more than 100). This year, at least 103 people have been executed in Saudi Arabia.

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