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Belarus: Time to end executions

“...every capital execution is one too many.”

Andrea Rigoni from the Council of Europe in an open letter to the authorities in Belarus,
14 April 2008

The Belarusian authorities must immediately declare a moratorium on death sentences and executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty completely, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

“The death penalty is the premeditated and cold-blooded killing of a human being by the state in the name of justice. It violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“Governments are obliged to dispense justice by punishing the guilty and providing redress for the victims and their relatives. However, executions are a symptom of a culture of violence rather than a solution to it.”

In its report, [*Ending executions in Europe: Towards abolition of the death penalty in Belarus*](#), Amnesty International builds an argument for the Belarusian authorities to abolish the death penalty and join the world trend to end capital punishment.

Belarus is the last country in Europe and the former Soviet Union that is still carrying out executions. There are no available official statistics for their number, but Amnesty International estimates that as many as 400 people may have been executed since Belarus gained its independence in 1991. International bodies have repeatedly called on Belarus to abolish the death penalty.

The whole process of the death penalty is shrouded in secrecy – prisoners and their relatives are not informed about the date of the execution, the body is not given to the relatives and they are not told where the burial place is.

The use of the death penalty in Belarus is compounded by a flawed criminal justice system. There is credible evidence that torture and ill-treatment are used to extract “confessions” and that condemned prisoners do not have access to effective appeal mechanisms. A young man accused of murder told Amnesty International in October 2008 how he had been beaten constantly for three days and forced to write a confession.

“A death penalty meted out by an inadequate and unfair legal system intensifies the inherent danger that an innocent person may be executed,” Nicola Duckworth said.

Since gaining independence, the Belarusian authorities have taken some steps towards ending the death penalty such as reducing the number of crimes punishable by death. A Constitutional Court decision in 2004 found that the death penalty was in conflict with the Constitution and that it could be abolished by the President and Parliament. However, the authorities have not yet demonstrated any political will to initiate an open and comprehensive public debate on the topic or to make the necessary legislative changes.

“By abolishing the death penalty Belarus will reduce its isolation from Europe. Its law enforcement agencies will be able to focus on the real solutions to the problem of crime without being distracted by the illusion that capital punishment can be a deterrent,” Nicola Duckworth said.

Background

The information in this report has been gathered over more than two decades of monitoring the practice of the death penalty in Belarus. In October 2008, an Amnesty International representative visited Belarus and met with lawyers, human rights activists, government officials, and former prisoners. Amnesty International is grateful for the assistance of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and other human rights activists in preparing this report.

The organization will be working with the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and other human rights groups to encourage public debate around the issue of the death penalty in 2009 and hopes that this report will contribute to that debate.