

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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Thailand: Executions must stop

World Day against the Death Penalty

"From hanging to electric chair to lethal injection: how much prettier can you make it? Yet the prettier it becomes the uglier it is"

Death row convict, United States of America

On the occasion of the World Day against the Death Penalty, Amnesty International calls on the Thai authorities, who on 19 October 2003 will introduce lethal injection to replace death by firing squad, to impose a moratorium on executions and abolish the death penalty.

Thai authorities have characterized the introduction of lethal injection technology as a humane measure that will ensure less "accidents" take place during execution.

"Changing the method of execution does not change the inhumanity of capital punishment. Whether people are shot or injected with chemicals, execution is still a judicial killing and a violation of the right to life," Amnesty International said today.

Scores of people may imminently face execution, and, with nearly 1,000 men and women under sentence of death, Amnesty International believes that Thailand has more people on death row than at any point in the country's history.

"We urge the Thai government to stop executions and to fight crime without taking lives," the organization added.

Amnesty International views any medical involvement in carrying out lethal injection as a violation of professional ethics. The organization calls upon health personnel not to participate in executions, and urges organizations of health professionals to protect health personnel who refuse to do so.

The number of people on death row in Thailand has reportedly nearly tripled in the last two years, and the majority of those recently sentenced have been convicted for drug offences. Authorities have repeatedly announced their intention to speed up the execution of those convicted of drug offences as a deterrent against increased production and trafficking.

In 2002 the Thai authorities stated to Amnesty International that Thailand, as a democracy, uses

capital punishment in reflection of general public opinion, which according to authorities "believes the punishment to be a necessary crime deterrent and a measure to protect the rights of the victims and families."

"There is no evidence to suggest that the death penalty has any unique deterrent effect on crime rates. If Thailand wishes to take serious steps towards protecting human rights, it should pursue policies to combat crime that do not violate human rights, and take steps to abolish the death penalty, in line with the global trend towards abolition," Amnesty International said. "Even those in favour of the death penalty concede that it is an irreversible punishment, and that the possibility of judicial error in capital trials risks executing the innocent. This is a risk that Thailand should not be prepared to take."

While various states introducing lethal injection have maintained that this method will make executions more humane, lethal injections do not necessarily deliver the swift and painless death claimed by the punishment's proponents. In the first execution by lethal injection in Guatemala, it took 18 minutes for the condemned prisoner to die. Paramedics had difficulties finding his veins, and his wife and children could be heard sobbing throughout. Prior to the execution, the local press and authorities had said that such executions would be painless, more humane and "over in 30 seconds." A growing number of legal and medical experts in the United States have also recently expressed concern that the cocktail of drugs used in lethal injections may leave the condemned prisoner conscious, paralysed, suffocating and in intense pain before death.

Background

68 men and women on death row in Thailand have exhausted all legal appeals and therefore may imminently face execution. A further 905 people are appealing their death sentences. Those on death row reportedly include citizens of Ghana, Hong Kong, Laos, Myanmar, Nigeria and Singapore, and members of Thailand's hill tribes, including the Hmong and Yao.

The death sentence is mandatory in Thailand for premeditated murder, killing of an official on government business; regicide; and the production and importation of heroin. It is discretionary for a number of offences including robbery, rape, kidnapping, arson and bombing, insurrection, treason and espionage, and possession of more than 100 grams of heroin or amphetamines, and aircraft hijacking.

Death sentences have predominantly been handed down for drug offences in the last two years, and a sizeable proportion of those on death row were convicted of drug offences. Confessions are frequently used as evidence in capital trials, and defendants have maintained in court that police used force to make them confess.

Thailand resumed executions in 1995 after an eight year moratorium, and since then has executed at least 50 people by firing squad. Prisoners executed by firing squad are required to stand with their hands tied to a pole, and are shot from behind a curtain. Death row convicts are informed of their execution three hours beforehand, and may not have time to see relatives for a last time before they are executed.

In adopting lethal injection technology, Thailand follows a number of states in the United States of America, which first introduced lethal injection as a method of legal execution in 1977, and China, Guatemala, the Philippines and Taiwan, which started executions with this method in the 1990s. Those executed by lethal injection are strapped to a gurney, then injected with an anaesthetic, followed by a paralyzing agent and finally potassium chloride, which stops the heart.

TAKE ACTION!

Please sign a petition to end the death penalty at: <http://www.worldcoalition.org>

For further information on Amnesty International's concerns about the use of lethal injection technology,

please see

Lethal Injection, the Medical Technology of Execution, Amnesty International 1998, and update in 1999

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGA500051998?open&of=ENG-TWN>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGA500081999?open&of=ENG-THA>

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