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Philippines: First execution in two years imminent

Amnesty International today urged President Arroyo of the Philippines to declare a moratorium on the death penalty and grant clemency to three men who are due to be executed in the next few months, one on 30 August.

If these executions go ahead, they will end a two-year freeze on executions introduced by former President Joseph Estrada in 2000 to mark the Christian Jubilee year. Although President Arroyo has commuted at least 18 death sentences since coming to power, she changed her mind in October last year saying that the government needed to "strike fear into the hearts of criminals."

"The President should know that executions fail to deter criminals. Soaring crime rates are a concern for many governments worldwide. However there are ways of tackling law and order problems and punishing criminals without resorting to killing. The death penalty achieves nothing but revenge," Amnesty International said.

Three prisoners, convicted of raping their daughters, are scheduled to be executed in the next two months. "President Arroyo has the power to grant clemency. She should do so, and declare a moratorium."

Women's groups in the Philippines have pointed out that the death penalty is not the solution to high rates of incest, saying that it has a brutalizing effect and risks increasing the suffering of vulnerable child victims. In 1999 a man convicted of incestuous rape was executed, despite pleas from his daughters that his life should be saved.

Amnesty International is also concerned that serious flaws in the criminal justice system, including the use of torture or ill-treatment to coerce confessions, may lead to execution of the innocent. Criminal suspects are often denied access to lawyers for prolonged periods and paraded in front of the media as criminals, before they have even been tried in court. Such abuses are in clear contravention of international human rights standards.

"Recent moves in Congress towards abolition of the death penalty are a welcome signal that change may be on the way," Amnesty International said. In May, the House Committees on Revision of Laws and Civil, Political and Human Rights approved bills providing for abolition. The Senate is currently debating a similar bill.

Amnesty International hopes that President Arroyo will follow the example of the President of Guatemala who, on the recent occasion of a visit to the country by Pope John Paul II, declared his opposition to the death penalty and announced his intention to work towards abolition. The Pope is due to visit the Philippines in January 2003.

Background

The Philippines moved against worldwide trends by reintroducing the death penalty in late 1993. It had previously been abolished in 1987. Executions were resumed in 1999 after 23 years. The death sentence may be imposed for a total of 46 different offences, including aggravated rape, bribery committed by a public officer, kidnapping for ransom, arson resulting in death and certain drug offences.

According to the Free Legal Assistance Group, by June 2002 there were 1,007 prisoners on death row in Manila.

Public Document

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