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Russian Federation: Amnesty International welcomes President Putin's commitment to abolish the death penalty

Amnesty International welcomed today President Vladimir Putin's statement in favour of the abolition of the death penalty in the Russian Federation.

President Putin's statement is a sign of a high political will and wisdom, Amnesty International said today.

President Putin was reported as saying yesterday in televised remarks from a Kremlin meeting with World Bank President James Wolfensohn, that Russia should uphold its five-year-old moratorium on the death penalty despite widespread calls to reinstate executions. "The state should not assume the right which only the Almighty has -- to take a human life," he said. "That is why I can say firmly -- I am against Russia reinstating the death penalty."

President Putin was also quoted as saying that he was aware of public opinion on the death penalty but believed that state-sponsored cruelty did nothing to fight crime and only engendered new violence.

Amnesty International now urges President Putin to use his authority to exert influence on the members of the Russian Duma to ratify without delay Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights, which provides for full abolition of the death penalty.

"Abolition in national law will provide a long-term guarantee against future political and government changes. It will also ensure that no judicial and institutional measures will re-introduce the use of the death penalty in the Russian Federation," Amnesty International said.

"The taking of life cannot be left to the mercy of individual politicians. Governments change; the taking of human life is irreversible," the human rights organization added.

All over the world, the abolition of the death penalty is a political decision and does not result from a popular referendum on the subject. Although in most countries, including ones where the death penalty has been officially abolished, the majority of people favour the death penalty as a crime fighting measure, state-sponsored cruelty has never stopped crime.

The organization has been also alarmed in recent months by President Putin's refusal to grant any clemencies to prisoners in Russia and, in this way, help alleviate the harsh conditions of detention in Russia's overcrowded prisons. Amnesty International is aware of petitions for clemency in up to 3000 cases which have been returned by the President without consideration -- the majority of these cases refer to minor crimes and first-time offenders, including women and children.

"Now is a prime time for the Russian President to follow his own words with action. By fully abolishing the death penalty, Russia can provide invaluable leadership as an important international player to countries which are still executing prisoners on death row, such as China, the United States, Saudi Arabia and others," Amnesty International said

Background

President Putin's statement last night was a reminder of similar words on the death penalty written to Amnesty International by the Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrey Sakharov.

In a letter to Amnesty International in September 1977 Andrey Sakharov wrote:"AI regard the death penalty as a savage, immoral

institution which undermines the ethical and legal foundations of a society. The state... assumes the right to the most terrible and irreversible act -- the taking of human life. I reject the notion that the death penalty has any real deterrent effect whatsoever on potential criminals. I am convinced that the contrary is true -- that savagery begets only savagery."

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