

257/98

AI INDEX: ASA 35/16/98

31 DECEMBER 1998

**Philippines - First execution scheduled for start of 1999 - a step back for human rights**

The Government of the Philippines is about to make one of its first official acts of 1999: the killing of a human being. Just a few days after Pope John Paul II made a special appeal for the abolition of the death penalty worldwide, Leo Echegaray is set to become the first person executed in the country since 1976.

"The beginning of a new year should be a time of hope and reconciliation," Amnesty International said, "but instead the Philippines authorities intend to mark the beginning of 1999 by committing a coldly calculated human rights violation. In doing so, they will be helping to compound the very cycle of violence that they are hoping to break"

Leo Echegaray, a 38 year old former house painter who was sentenced to death for the rape of his then 10-year old step-daughter, is one of at least 820 people who have been sentenced to death since the Philippines reintroduced the death penalty for heinous crimes in 1994.

"To resume executions after a twenty-two year break is a tragedy for human rights in the Philippines, and goes against the trend to end this outdated and brutal practice," Amnesty International said. "Over half the countries of the world have turned their backs on this punishment, realising that it does nothing to solve the problem of violent crime"

In countries that have abolished the death penalty there are sometimes strong pressures to reintroduce it. Amnesty International is aware of the very serious crimes for which many people sentenced to death in the Philippines have been convicted, and has deep sympathy for the victims of violent crime. However, there is no reliable evidence that the death penalty deters crime more effectively than other punishments.

Appeals for clemency have been made to President Estrada by the Philippine Roman Catholic bishops, the Vatican and the European Union, while the Philippines Senate has recently passed a resolution urging Estrada to declare a moratorium on executions. However, national and international outrage has failed to persuade the President to reconsider his decision not to grant a reprieve to Leo Echegaray.

"President Estrada has said that Leo Echegaray's execution 'will serve as a lesson'. The only lesson that can be learnt by ending Leo Echegaray's life next Monday is that killing is an appropriate response to crime -- thereby entrenching a culture of violence deep into Filipino society," Amnesty International said.

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**An Amnesty International delegation will be in Manila from 1 January. For details, please contact Tim Parritt on +63 (0) 912 380 1815**