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Ukraine: Government action needed now to abolish death penalty

The Ukrainian Government should honour its pledge to the Council of Europe by immediately abolishing the death penalty, Amnesty International urged today.

This follows the adoption of a resolution by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 27 January, which strongly condemned continuing executions in Ukraine and demanded that Ukraine stops all further executions.

“Ukraine has executed more people in 1996 than any other country in the world except China,” Amnesty International said. “Despite promises to abolish the death penalty, Ukraine has continued to carry out executions well into 1997.”

The Council of Europe resolution called on Ukraine to introduce a full legal moratorium and put an immediate end to the secrecy which currently surrounds all executions. The Parliamentary Assembly stated that unless it received formal notification of a moratorium on executions, it would consider revoking the credentials of the Ukrainian delegation at the Assembly’s next meeting.

Although Ukraine’s signature of Protocol No. 6 on 5 May 1997 was a welcome development, Amnesty International is extremely disturbed to learn that at least 13 prisoners were executed in 1997. This is according to information released by former Minister of Justice Serhiy Holovatiy in August 1997 and confirmed during a fact-finding mission to Ukraine by Renate Wohlwend of the Parliamentary Assembly’s Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

It is also alarming that despite repeated requests, Ukrainian officials were unable to give Mrs. Wohlwend the dates of execution or the names of the prisoners executed. However, sources continued to maintain that a further execution was carried out after 5 May 1997.

“Any suspension of executions remains unofficial and tenuous, depending solely on the decision of one person -- the President,” Amnesty International said “It could easily be reversed, especially as the mechanism for carrying out executions evidently remains in place.”

Amnesty International is calling on the Ukrainian authorities to commute all existing death sentences and to issue public orders to all prison governors that no further executions are carried out. The government should also ensure that the death penalty is removed from the Ukrainian penal code, and swiftly ratify Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights. The authorities should also publish comprehensive information on the use of the death penalty, including the names and case details of all prisoners executed and all prisoners currently under sentence of death.

Background

In 1996, according to official statistics released by the Ministry of Justice, 167 death sentences were passed and 167 prisoners were executed, some of whom had been sentenced to death in previous years. There are currently more than 260 prisoners under sentence of death in Ukraine.

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