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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL BACKS UNITED NATIONS CALL TO LIMIT EXECUTIONS

GENEVA – Amnesty International today welcomed a call by the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights to limit executions in the face of an unprecedented use of the death penalty worldwide last year. The Commission's resolution calls on all states that have not yet abolished the death penalty to progressively restrict the number of offences for which it may be imposed.

According to the human rights organization, at least 7,000 people were sentenced to death during 1996 and more than 4,000 prisoners were executed – the highest figures ever recorded by Amnesty International.

“Despite a growing acceptance that the death penalty has no place in a modern society, a hard core of countries continue to execute people in increasing numbers,” Amnesty International said. “Today's resolution is a welcome reminder to these governments that the weight of world opinion is against them.”

In the countries which passed large numbers of death sentences, executions frequently took place after unfair trials, sentences were based on forced confessions and prisoners denied legal assistance.

The call to limit executions came at the UN Commission on Human Rights, which today adopted a resolution calling on countries which retain the death penalty “to consider suspending executions with a view to completely abolishing the death penalty”. The resolution, co-sponsored by Italy and 44 other countries, was adopted by a vote of 27 in favour and 11 against, with 14 abstentions.

Seven amendments which were incompatible with the spirit and letter of the original resolution were the subject of separate votes and defeated decisively. The amendments were moved by Malaysia which opposed the resolution on grounds including that the death penalty is not a human rights issue and only would be if there were serious abuses of its use.

Figures released by Amnesty International today showed that at least 4,272 prisoners were executed in 39 countries in 1996. 7,017 people were known to have been sentenced to death in 76 countries during the year. However, the organization believes the true figures to be much higher.

The execution figure represents an increase of 30 per cent over 1995, when 3,276 prisoners were known to have been executed and 4,165 sentenced to death.

The leap in world executions was due to China's increased use of the death penalty in the "strike hard" anti-crime drive launched in April. Amnesty International recorded more than 3,500 executions in the country during 1996. Most prisoners did not receive fair trials and many were executed very soon after sentence of death was pronounced.

In the Ukraine, 169 prisoners were executed, while at least 140 were executed in the Russian Federation and more than 110 in Iran. The figures from these three countries and China accounted for 92 per cent of all executions recorded worldwide.

There were unconfirmed reports of 123 executions in Turkmenistan, and reports of numerous executions in Iraq, although the exact figure is unknown.

In the USA, at least 3,150 prisoners were on death row at the end of September 1996 and 45 prisoners were executed in the country during the year.

Despite the increase in executions, Amnesty International said it remained optimistic about the worldwide trend towards abolition. Belgium abolished the death penalty in 1996, bringing to 58 the number of countries to have abolished the punishment for all crimes. A further 15 countries have abolished the death penalty for common crimes such as murder and 27 countries are abolitionist in practice, having suspended executions for 10 years or more. Over half the countries in the world are now abolitionist in law or practice.

The most recent move was in Poland, where the Sejm -- the lower house of parliament -- voted on 20 March to abolish the death penalty in the course of revising the country's penal code. The decision is likely to be accepted in the Polish Senate later this spring.

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