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£CUBA - @GOVERNMENT URGED TO HALT EXECUTIONS

Amnesty International is urging the Cuban government to stop executions and not to carry out its threats to step up the use of the death penalty in political cases.

"Over the last few weeks senior members of the government have been suggesting that they may execute people they consider 'counter-revolutionaries'," said Amnesty International. "Already this year, one man has been executed by firing squad - this must not prove to be the thin end of the wedge."

On 20 January 1992, Eduardo Díaz Betancourt was executed, after being found guilty of planning to carry out terrorism and sabotage. He was shot just 23 days after his arrest - rushed through a legal system that makes scant provision for adequate defence or impartial review of appeals. Four other people are known to have been executed for state security crimes in Cuba since 1984.

"The government is threatening to use the death penalty more and more often for political crimes," warned Amnesty International. "We are urging them not to carry out those threats. There are more than 15 crimes against the state which carry the death penalty on the Cuban statute book - if the government carries out these threats, we are afraid that it could in the future also be used against prisoners of conscience."

In the past month, several key political figures, including leading Politburo member Carlos Aldana, have said they want to see tougher punishment, which could include the death penalty, for "counter-revolutionaries" - a term used by the Cuban authorities to describe both violent and non-violent opponents.

Moreover, Vice-President Raúl Castro has even threatened to bring back the Revolutionary Courts, which sent scores of government opponents to the firing squads following summary trials in the first years after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. At the funeral of three policemen killed by "counter-revolutionaries", he warned: "Let all counter-revolutionaries both inside and outside the country know that those who live by the sword, die by the sword."

Although Cuba retains the death penalty for both political and criminal offences, the number of people sentenced to death had fallen off - last year, for example, executions were down to two. Now, however, everything points towards an impending increase in the use of the death penalty; "This would be a serious backwards step for Cuba," said Amnesty International.

Amnesty International condemns the use of the death penalty in all cases, believing it to be the ultimate form of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and a violation of the right to life. In addition, in Cuba the organization has serious concerns about the legal procedures that lead to execution.

"Trial, sentence, appeals and execution sometimes take place within days of the original arrest," said Amnesty International. "This is bound to mean that people facing the death penalty cannot prepare a reasonable defence." Other concerns include extremely limited access to lawyers before a trial, inadequate time and facilities for the defence and unfair

hearings.

"The death penalty is never acceptable," said Amnesty International. "In Cuba, capital punishment is not even backed up by an adequate system of legal guarantees, and now the government is threatening to send still more people to the firing squad."

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